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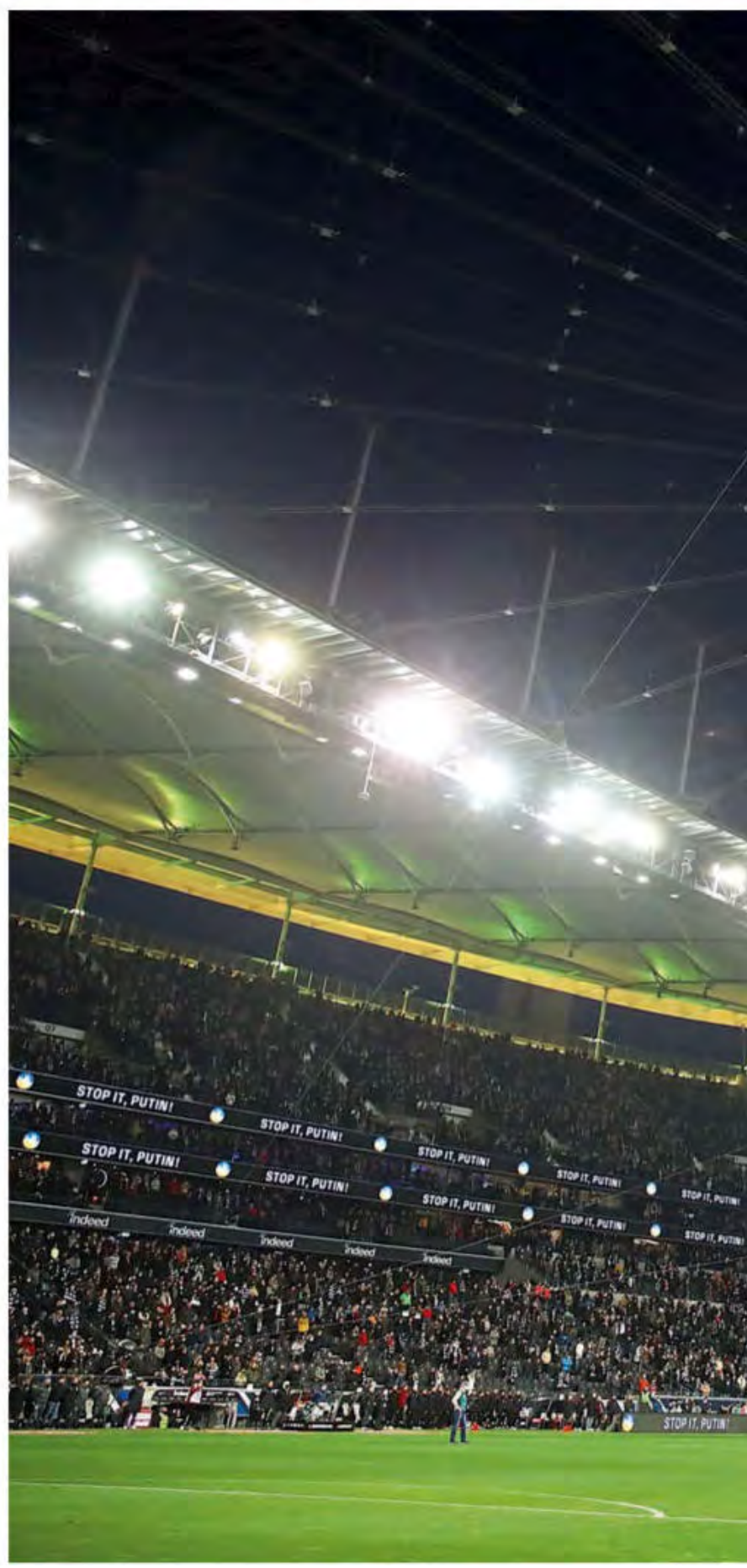
The global game caught on camera

Ukraine...young boys play football in Novoluhanske, an eastern Ukrainian town that was shelled two days after this photo was taken

England...Ukraine duo Oleksandr Zinchenko and Vitaliy Mykolenko emotionally embrace ahead of Everton's Premier League clash with Manchester City

Spain...players of Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao come together to send their own anti-war message

Greece...Atalanta's Ukrainian midfielder Ruslan Malinovskyi reveals a "No war in Ukraine" T-shirt after scoring v Olympiakos



Portugal...Ukraine's Roman Yaremchuk reveals his country's coat of arms after scoring for Benfica against Ajax in the Champions League

Croatia...Dinamo Zagreb fans show their support to the people of Ukraine

Germany...like every other Bundesliga and Bundesliga II club, Eintracht Frankfurt and Bayern Munich observe a minute's silence on the final weekend of February

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FROM THE EDITOR

The countdown to Qatar 2022 is beginning to start in earnest with the World Cup preliminaries from all major confederations scheduled to conclude at the end of March, including the play-offs to decide the final qualifiers from Europe and Africa.

However, in light of recent events in Ukraine, the European section is now under a huge cloud of uncertainty after FIFA and UEFA announced that Russia would be suspended "until further notice". With the World Cup qualifiers in flux due to the current situation, more decisive action could soon follow from the world and European football governing bodies as the tragic events continue to unfold.

For the European World Cup qualifying action that does go ahead, Jim Holden and Jared Tinslay preview the crunch clashes, while Mark Gleeson casts his eye over the African ties, which includes the likes of Senegal, Egypt, Nigeria and Ghana all battling it out for a place on the plane to the Gulf this winter.

Before the inter-confederational play-offs take place in June, which will finalise the definitive 32 nations taking part in Qatar 2022, the World Cup draw itself will take place in early April, and Keir Radnedge previews the event in Doha, reviewing the entire journey from the launch of the bid in 2007 to where we are today.

More decisive action could soon follow from the world and European football governing bodies as the tragic events continue to unfold

It isn't just nations battling for their places in Qatar either – the jostling of players hoping to break into their countries' squads ahead of the big kick-off is well underway too, and Jamie Evans highlights the most promising uncapped World Cup hopefuls in this issue's instalment of 6 of the best.

Another player who might have been labelled a "World Cup hopeful" prior to the 2021-22 season kicking off is Brazil's Vinicius Junior, but his sparkling form this season has seen him develop from the fringes of the *Selecao* squad to a near-certainty to fly to Qatar. Nick Bidwell charts the Real Madrid showman's graduation this season from exciting youngster to fully-fledged *Galactico*.

The journey from Brazilian wonderkid to world megastar is a path well trodden, and the endless production line of samba talent fails to let up with Endrick's explosion to a global audience. Tim Vickery shines the spotlight on the 15-year-old Palmeiras phenomenon in Talent Scout, along with eight other starlets ahead of the new Brazilian league season.

While leagues across the Atlantic are just commencing, campaigns closer to home are approaching the business end of the season, giving us the chance to analyse the big talking points in the Premier League, Bundesliga, La Liga, Serie A and Ligue 1. Jonathan Wilson, Nick Bidwell, Sid Lowe, Paddy Agnew and Adam White offer their incisive analysis on Europe's top five leagues as the final stretch looms.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

Football Stands Together...a message at Wembley stadium ahead of February's Carabao Cup final

UKRAINE

Football reacts to Russian invasion

Around the world of football, confederations, federations, clubs and individuals have been reacting to the events unfolding in Ukraine.

The strongest spotlights have been placed on UEFA and FIFA, with Saint Petersburg originally scheduled to host this season's Champions League final, and Russia due to take part in 2022 World Cup qualifying play-offs at the end of March.

UEFA quickly moved their showpiece event to Paris, while also ending its reported £30 million-a-year sponsorship deal with Russian energy giant Gazprom. All Russian clubs were then suspended from UEFA competitions, ending Spartak Moscow's involvement in the Europa League.

FIFA's reaction was more cautionary. In a move echoing the IOC's verdict on Russian athletes at the Winter Olympics, they initially decreed that Russia could still take part in the World Cup play-offs, but would have to do so under the name "Football Union of Russia", play on neutral territory, and without their national flag and anthem.

The ruling lasted just 24 hours, with the FAs of Sweden, Poland and Czech Republic – who are all in Russia's path of the play-off draw – insisting they would refuse to play the Russians, which prompted more decisive action from FIFA to ban Russia "until further notice".

The conflict continued to have repercussions across the rest of the world, too.

ENGLAND

Roman Abramovich announced his intention to sell Chelsea, with reports claiming he values the club at £3bn. In an official statement, he said it was "in the best interest of the Club, the fans,

"We were driving and there were tanks coming past us. You see that stuff on Call of Duty. It was surreal. I've never seen anything like that in my life"

Rukh Lviv player Viv Solomon-Otabor describes leaving Ukraine

the employees, as well as the Club's sponsors and partners." Abramovich also pledged that "all net proceeds from the sale will be donated...for the benefit of all victims of the war in Ukraine. This includes providing critical funds towards the urgent and immediate needs of victims, as well as supporting the long-term work of recovery."

Meanwhile, Alisher Usmanov, a Russian billionaire with commercial ties to Everton, had his assets frozen by the European Union, while the Toffees later suspended all commercial sponsorship arrangements with the Russian companies USM, Megafon and Yota.

Manchester United also terminated their sponsorship deal with Russian airline Aeroflot.

RUSSIA

Markus Gisdol stepped down from his role as manager of Lokomotiv Moscow in protest at Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The German had only been in charge for 12 matches, but told German newspaper *Bild*: "I can't do that job in a country whose leader has invaded another country in the middle of Europe. That does not go together with my values." The club, however, insisted that Gisdol was sacked.

Andriy Voronin also walked away from Russian football, quitting his role as assistant manager of Dynamo Moscow. "I do not see any possibility of staying in a country whose army destroys our cities and fires at civilians", the former Ukraine international told *Bild*.

Elsewhere, other sporting organisations also cut their association with Russia, with adidas suspending its kit partnership with the national team, and the European Club Association announcing that "all Russian members will cease to be involved with ECA activities."

MOLDOVA

Just months after overseeing famous Champions League wins over Real Madrid and Shakhtar Donetsk, Sheriff Tiraspol head coach Yuriy Vernydub joined the Ukrainian front line to help fight in his home country.

GERMANY

Amidst multiple demonstrations across the top two flights, with fans, players and clubs displaying messages of unity with Ukraine, Schalke announced they would be ending their partnership with Gazprom as well, with the energy company's logo removed from their shirts.

Kit change...Schalke's new-look shirts

HEROES & VILLAINS

Akapo...in action against Granada

CARLOS AKAPO

The Cadiz defender was praised after confronting a Granada fan who was racially abusing him as he walked around the pitch. Rather than walking by, Akapo stopped to address the man. "There have been three or four a**holes...but above all there was one who persisted and called me a monkey," said the Equatorial Guinea international afterwards. "I treated him calmly, to make people see what idiocy and nonsense they do. Many thanks also to the Granada fans who told him to stop."

GIANLUIGI BUFFON

The Italy great simply refuses to retire. In February, he signed a new contract with Parma to remain at the Serie B side until 2024, when he'll be 46 years old. "I am optimistic for the future of this club," he said. "It is a beautiful and exciting challenge for me." Buffon recently made history by becoming the first goalkeeper ever to keep 500 career clean sheets.

BAHIA

Three players from the Brazilian second-tier side were injured after a bomb exploded on the team coach as it arrived at their home stadium in Salvador. Goalkeeper Danilo Fernandes, left-back Matheus Bahia and forward Marcelo Cirino were all taken to hospital yet, remarkably, the team proceeded with their game anyway, beating Sampaio Correa 2-0.

REBEKAH STOTT

The New Zealand centre-back played in all three of her country's games at this year's SheBelieves Cup, less than a year after being diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. In March 2021, Stott announced that she needed four months of chemotherapy in order to treat the blood cancer, yet was back playing A-League football for Melbourne City by December. Her international return completes a remarkable turnaround.

MICHAEL OWEN

The BT Sport pundit was branded a "caveman" by colleague Chris Sutton while discussing head injuries in the Champions League clash between Benfica and Ajax. Sutton has been highly outspoken on head injuries after his father's dementia was linked to his football career, and the former Celtic striker argued that IFAB needs to "step up and change concussion protocols" after Ajax's Lisandro Martinez played on following a clash of heads.

GIGI BECALI

Romanian side FCSB were forced to issue a clarification after their owner, Gigi Becali, was alleged to have claimed the club would not pick players vaccinated against COVID-19 because: "All vaccinated people lose their strength!" In a statement, an FCSB spokesperson confirmed that their vaccinated players would continue to play, and that their owner was joking.

MARC OVERMARS

Ajax are on the hunt for a new director of football after their former winger was forced to resign from the role for "a series of inappropriate messages sent to several female colleagues". Overmars was appointed in 2012, and recently signed a new contract to remain until 2026, before the messages emerged. "For someone in my position, this behaviour is unacceptable," he said. "I now see that too, but it is too late. I see no other option but to leave Ajax."

GREEK SUPPORTERS' CLUBS

Supporters' clubs across Greece will be shut down for five months in the latest attempt to get a grip on fan violence. In February, 19-year-old Aris supporter Alkis Kambanos was stabbed and beaten to death in Thessaloniki. Ten arrests have been made, with supporters' clubs remaining closed until July 31 at least, following a review.

Tributes...flowers are laid at the spot where Kambanos was killed

"Hopefully Nico, Pedri and Gavi can give us more joys and go beyond what Busquets, Iniesta and I have done"

Barcelona coach Xavi compares the club's current midfield starlets with his own generation

Xavier SIMONS

(Chelsea)

Chelsea, it seems, are developing a problem when it comes to holding on to their academy talents.

Simons, who made his first-team debut in December, is out of contract this summer and is said to be reluctant to sign a new deal without assurances of first-team football, with Southampton, Watford and Brighton on red alert.

While the Blues were happy to cash in on the likes of Tammy Abraham and Fikayo Tomori for big fees last summer, the departures of Tino Livramento (below) to Southampton and Lewis Bate to Leeds for much smaller amounts were less welcome.

The talent drain is demonstrated by the displays of the club's Under-23 side, who could be relegated from the Premier League 2 after finishing in the top two in each of the last two seasons.

Midfielder Simons may be the latest in a long line of talent to walk away from Stamford Bridge.

Mason BURSTOW
(Charlton Athletic)
They kept it under the radar, but in February Chelsea completed a deal for the 18-year-old, who will spend the rest of the season at the Valley, after six goals in his first 20 professional appearances.

Ohi OMOIJUANFO
(Red Star Belgrade)
After scoring 27 goals for Molde before Christmas, the Norwegian struck on his league debut for new club Red Star to keep pace with Robert Lewandowski in the race for the European Golden Shoe.

Cathal HEFFERNAN
(Milan)
The Republic of Ireland Under-17 captain joined Milan on loan from Cork City after a successful trial. The defender is expected to sign permanently in the summer.

Niklas SULE
(Bayern Munich)
In a reversal of a popular trend in the Bundesliga, the giant Germany centre-back is joining Borussia Dortmund from Bayern when his contract expires this summer.

Aleksandar MITROVIC
(Fulham)
Brentford striker Ivan Toney's record of 31 Championship goals in one season stood for a matter of months before Mitrovic overtook it – with almost a third of the campaign remaining.

Blaise MATUIDI
(Inter Miami)
The World Cup winner is expected to be a free agent after being omitted from Inter Miami's squad list for the 2022 Major League Soccer season.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Qatar 2022? Italy can take it or leave it

Italy have lost just once in their last 41 internationals, a sequence that includes a world-record run of 37 matches undefeated and last summer's Euros trophy. Yet they find themselves on the brink of failure to qualify for the World Cup finals; it is a most curious situation.

There is another curiosity about the situation as well: if Italy don't make it through the play-offs to reach the tournament in Qatar, the people of a football-obsessed nation will respond with a philosophical shrug of shoulders rather than crushing sadness.

The play-off final is likely to be away to Portugal – a thunderous showdown that would also, probably, represent Cristiano Ronaldo's last chance to reach a World Cup.

It would be a fifth for Ronaldo, equalling the record number of tournaments of Lothar Matthaus, Gianluigi Buffon, Rafael Marquez and Antonio Carbajal. Lionel Messi is set to add his name to that prestigious list, with Argentina already qualified – a fact that will make Ronaldo even more desperate to play in Qatar.

Semi-finals against Turkey and North Macedonia must be negotiated first, but Portugal v Italy would be a contest of immense pressure and probably a night of the finest margins.

Portugal were dumped into the play-offs because they conceded a last-minute goal at home to Serbia. Italy joined them because Jorginho did not score with a penalty in their final qualifier against Switzerland.

See any omens there? Think you can pick a winner with logic? No chance. Both teams are blessed with fine players; both are fragile, having betrayed their susceptibility to tension.

One difference is that Portugal have Ronaldo. Another difference is that the Italy fans appear less stressed about the play-offs, even though failure means missing out on two successive World Cups. Could that be a psychological bonus for Roberto Mancini's team?

Italy's absence from Russia 2018 was treated as a matter of national shame. Coach Gian Piero Ventura, who had lost only two matches in two years, was hounded out in disgrace. The nation had only once previously failed to qualify, way back in 1958, and now there is the distinct possibility of two in a row.

Dejection...Italy failed to win their qualifying group

Yet the sentiment is nothing like four years earlier. Why? One reason, certainly, is because they are European champions. Desire for success has so recently been sated. Fans know the team played above themselves to win the tournament last summer – it was an unexpected triumph, fashioned by intelligent coaching from Mancini and the self-belief created by a long unbeaten run.

Mancini, speaking last December, reflected: "The players were excellent during the Euros...we needed a bit of luck, but the alchemy was there."

It was a perfect analysis. There was a magical chemistry that drove Italy on, one that was impossible to maintain. Key players were injured and the standard of play declined, the spell was broken, even if there was only one narrow defeat to Spain in the Nations League.

Another observation from Mancini was this: "Everything was too easy during the Euros. We needed to suffer a little."

> If Italy don't make it to the World Cup in Qatar, the people of a football-obsessed nation will respond with a philosophical shrug of shoulders

Last-chance saloon... could Qatar 2022 be Cristano Ronaldo's last World Cup?

He said it with a smile; surely revealing that qualifying for a World Cup finals has lost some of its old intensity.

The word "suffer" is spoken endlessly in Italian football. Tottenham manager Antonio Conte says it all the time to explain his robust training methods. Players use it to explain periods in matches when forced to defend against high-class opponents. Fans do so, too.

It seems there is another factor at play here: that the prospect of a winter World Cup, interrupting the precious Serie A season, is simply not so enticing.

Yes, players will fight to qualify. Yes, fans will celebrate if they do. But this one is more easily kept in perspective.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Counting down to Qatar

The phone call lasted around half an hour. On the other end of a line was a Scunthorpe United fan. Not any Scunthorpe United fan. This one was from Qatar and he was telling me a fantastical tale of how a little-known Gulf state with a population of less than three million wanted to stage the World Cup in 2022.

This was some 15 years ago, long before any awkward talk of *kafala* and workers' conditions had ever drawn attention. Now, with the draw for the finals looming on April 1, the most remarkable of World Cups is on the horizon.

I had known Qatar from attending an international youth tournament in the mid 1980s, plus its short-notice staging of the World Youth Cup in 1995 as late substitute for Nigeria. Back then it had only one city and Doha had only one high-rise building: the Sheraton Hotel, with a glass-framed exterior lift providing rising and descending guests a dramatic view of the Gulf.

The Scunthorpe fan was named Hassan Al Thawadi. He was a law graduate from the University of Sheffield so this was no April fool's phone call. Al Thawadi was the impressive playmaker for the bid. He talked of Qatar's ambition, of its wealth and of its sci-fi scheme for air-cooled stadia. Then he added that fans could stay in just one hotel for the entire tournament and even attend two matches a day.

This was the afterthought that made me sit up. In South Africa in 2010 and in Brazil in 2014 long-suffering fans (not to mention media, officials and players) would have to fly many hundreds of miles, breathlessly criss-crossing the nations in between games.

By 2022 Qatar had the potential to be a very welcome opposite.

Thus the doubled-up bidding games began. Everyone knows how they ended – with Russia landing 2018 as expected and rank outsider Qatar securing 2022. FIFA president Sepp Blatter was apoplectic. He believed he had set up a Russia-United States double, "a perfect recognition of a new era for the world after the Cold War." Blatter's executive committee vote sank his dream of a Nobel Peace Prize.

The bidding battle had been riddled with corruption. Two exco members were kicked out after being caught in a newspaper sting. Within a few years more than half of the remaining 22 voters had been banished from football for one money-grabbing reason or another.

Blatter blamed Michel Platini. UEFA's French president had switched his vote to Qatar after an infamous lunch at the Elysee Palace hosted by President Nicolas Sarkozy at which the other main guest was the future Emir. Platini, for the record, continues to insist that his change of heart was unconnected.

FIFA secretary-general Jerome Valcke told CONCACAF supremo Jack Warner, in an email, that Qatar had "bought" the World Cup. Valcke excused himself on the grounds of loose language. He said he meant Qatar had spent more on worldwide PR than all the other bids put together. No doubt. On the day I had visited Paris to see the Netherlands/Belgium bid team cycle up the Champs Elysees, I also saw one of the world's most iconic streets decorated from Arc de Triomphe to Concorde with Qatar bid flags.

Other bumps lay in wait. Phaedra Al Majid, a Qatar PR manager, claimed that three exco members had been bribed; later she recanted and vanished from view. *The Sunday*

Qatar...Sepp Blatter reveals the host of the 2022 World Cup

> A credible national team had to be created, all-new stadia built and the hosting footprint assimilated into the grandiose state development scheme

Times accused AFC president Mohamed bin Hammam of spreading largesse far and wide in search of votes for Qatar; in truth MBH's target was the FIFA presidency, and Qatar's successful bid undermined his personal ambitions. Further short-lived furore surrounded the lucrative media rights deal granted to Qatar's beIN Media and its suave supremo Nasser Al Khelaifi (who would emerge as president of Paris Saint-Germain in 2011).

The dark farce shamed FIFA into an investigation headed by US attorney Michael Garcia. It found nothing of moment. Qatar's only rules breach had been funding an African confederation dinner. Al Thawadi, now at the head of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, could breathe a sigh of relief and concentrate on preparing to welcome a still-grumpy world.

One early objection, after the bidding shenanigans, was the impossibility of playing a World Cup in burning summer temperatures. Qatar had lauded air-cooling stadia technology but Blatter removed that barb anyway by approving a first (northern hemisphere) winter World Cup. Europe's leagues acquiesced surprisingly easily.

Qatar's preparations were treble-tracked. A credible national team had to be created, all-new stadia had to be built and the hosting footprint had to be assimilated into the grandiose National Vision 2030 state development scheme. All financed by Qatar's wealth in natural gas and oil.

Several old World Cup veterans were imported into the Qatar Stars League to raise standards. The success of the overall operation can be judged by the presence of only one foreign-based player in the 23-man squad who triumphed at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Meanwhile Qatar went on growing. The Gulf skyline changed dramatically on my every subsequent visit. The once upstanding Sheraton was now dwarfed by an air-conditioned high-rise forest of glass and steel.

This is the bright side. But the bright side is not the only side.

Every host of a World Cup (or Olympic Games) comes in for sustained attack from foreign media, politicians and critics with their own agendas. This is the downside of winning host rights to whatever. Signing the host contract fires a starting pistol for critical sharp-shooters in all the losing nations and beyond.

Usually a host must withstand the assault for the usual FIFA or IOC preparatory cycle of five to seven years. Not Qatar. By the time the World Cup kicks off on November 21 the Gulf state will have been out there, swinging in the wind, for a full 12 years. Most of the issues have gone away. One has not and will not. This is the issue on which Qatar was most vulnerable: the conditions for immigrant workers from southeast Asia on whose backs this high-tech, high-rise metropolis in the desert is being built.

All agree: construction work is dangerous. How many have died building the ultra-modern Qatar? Who knows for sure? A report in *The Guardian* last year claimed 6,500 overall, with 37 of those on World Cup stadia.

The original, derided workers' conditions included *kafala*, the employment contract system that, to western eyes, was no more than slave labour. Qatar was not alone. The practice was common across the Gulf. But Qatar was different because Qatar was to host the World Cup.

Pressure from international trade unions and human rights organisations, from FIFA and from the international media prompted the Supreme Committee to enshrine a labour agreement far beyond anything anywhere else in the region. Not that this has assuaged critics. The deal applies only to the construction of World Cup-specific projects. Not to wider infrastructure.

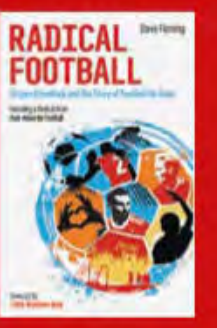
This issue – and others such as that of the jailed former media manager Abdullah Ibhais – will play, ever more virulently in the international media and human rights forums, right up until kick-off.

Four weeks later, on December 18, comes the World Cup final in the Lusail Iconic Stadium. The final whistle will set off a dash to catch the first flight home in time for Christmas and the New Year. Then, in no time at all, Qatar's fantastical World Cup will be consigned to sporting history. The circus will move on.

And Hassan Al Thawadi can enjoy his first day off in 15 years.

***Kafala*...workers on a construction site in Doha back in 2011**

BOOKS THIS MONTH



Radical Football
By Steve Fleming (Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

Jurgen Griesbeck is, through Common Goal, leading transformational change across the football industry. Set up in partnership with World Cup winner Juan Mata, Common Goal aims to reconstruct football's role in society and help put purpose, people and the planet at the heart of the game. This remarkable book shows how the power of football can – and must – be unleashed for social change.

Rise Together
By Adam Sloman (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

This book examines the rebirth of Coventry City FC from 2017 to 2020. Having sunk to the depths of English football's lowest professional division, the Sky Blues were a million miles from the FA Cup-winning heyday of 1987 and the glitz and glamour of Premier League football. After a decade of decline, the arrival of Mark Robins for a second spell in charge would end all that. The story of *Rise Together: Coventry City Under Mark Robins* is one that every football fan will appreciate.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Reds' rebuild is right on track

A year or so ago, it became apparent that for Liverpool a problem was lurking. It wasn't an immediate issue, which in a way made it all the more troublesome, but all three of their forward line – a trio who, when in form, represented perhaps the most perfectly-balanced front three the Premier League has ever known – were all going to turn 30 in this 2021-22 season.

That perhaps isn't quite such a definitive cut-off as it used to be. Players, with better diets and significantly improved conditioning and recovery regimes, can go on far longer now than they used to. But still, 30 stands as a line, after which the trend tends to be downward: pace begins to wane and injuries take longer to shake off. What made Liverpool's case unusual was that they had three players reaching that critical age at the same time.

It may be that at 33 or 34, the trio are still all going strong – even if there have been some doubts about both Roberto Firmino and Sadio Mane recently. But it could equally be that in a year all three are definitively on the slide, a situation complicated by the fact that Mohamed Salah, whose contract expires next year, still hasn't signed a new deal. Mane and Firmino's contracts are also both up in summer 2023.

Klopp has had squad players who could relieve the burden on the front three – the likes of Adam Lallana, Xherdan Shaqiri and Divock Origi – but it was only in January 2020 with the signing of Takumi Minamino that there seemed a conscious effort to begin to bring in replacements. Rejuvenating a squad is one of the trickiest tests of a manager who seeks to endure for more than a couple of seasons.

Of all Alex Ferguson's many gifts, perhaps the key one in allowing him to manage Manchester United for 27 years was his ruthlessness. He was extremely good at working out when a player had served his purpose, and had very little compunction about off-loading them; dismantling something that seems to be working requires great clarity of vision. That is not a universal trait, even among the greatest managers. Bill Shankly, for instance, allowed his first great Liverpool to grow old together, before belatedly culling his squad and building anew; Bob Paisley was merciless in ensuring he did not fall into the same trap. One of the reasons Don Revie decided to leave the Leeds job for England, meanwhile, is widely believed to be that he couldn't bear breaking up a squad that had become like family to him.

Turning 30... Liverpool's front three of Sadio Mane, Roberto Firmino and Mo Salah

> Rejuvenating a squad is one of the trickiest tests of a manager who seeks to endure for more than a couple of seasons

Minamino had looked an excellent player at Red Bull Salzburg. He was adept at pressing and seemed ideal for a Klopp system. But it hasn't, yet, quite worked for him at Liverpool, for whom he has only ever started four

Impact... new signing Luis Diaz with Diogo Jota

league games. Given he is 27, it now seems he will be, at best, a squad player. Perhaps the problem was simply that he came slightly too early, that the fraying of the front three was at that stage insufficient for him to be given much of an opportunity.

Diogo Jota's start could hardly have been more different. He scored on his debut after coming off the bench against Arsenal and, although he then missed 15 games in the middle of the season with injury, he very quickly became an alternative to Firmino. The intelligence of his movement had been apparent at Wolves, but in a stronger, more attacking side he truly blossomed, registering nine goals in 12 starts and seven substitute appearances. By this season, it wasn't even clear who the first-choice front three was any more.

The development of the squad continued this January with the signing of Luis Diaz from Porto; like Jota, he is 25. It seems probable that Liverpool would not have signed him until the summer had it not been for strong interest from Tottenham, but his introduction could hardly have been more impressive. As Klopp observed, he looked like a Liverpool player right from the off. Diaz looked good off the bench against Cardiff City in the FA Cup, impressed against Leicester City in his first league start and then made a telling contribution as a substitute in the 2-0 win away to Inter in the Champions League.

All five of Liverpool's forwards played in that game, but the Salah-Firmino-Mane combination did not play together. It was Firmino and Salah who got the goals, but all five made a contribution, even if Mane still looked a little leggy after returning from the Africa Cup of Nations. But that suggests how effective the rebuilding job has been: even if one is slightly off-form, there are four others who can change a game.

It's still early and there is life still in the old front three, but Liverpool seem to have handled what could have been an extremely tricky rebuilding process remarkably well.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Distraught... Meikayla Moore

1 IMPERFECT HAT-TRICK

Meikayla Moore's 50th cap for New Zealand should have been a proud day, but it turned into an anxiety dream come to life for the defender. In the fifth minute, she sliced a cross into the back of her own net with her right foot, then 80 seconds later she mistimed a header that also beat her keeper. Half an hour later her misery was complete, this time sending a left-footed miscued clearance into the Ferns' net to make it a hat-trick of own goals. In the 40th minute, the Liverpool defender was put out of her misery and subbed off.

2 K-POP FOOTBALL

Jurgen Klopp's brand of high-tempo football has at times been described as "heavy metal football", while in Germany he's known as one of the architects of *gegenpressing*. Presumably that's what BBC pundit and former Reds star Stephen Warnock had in mind when he described the Liverpool manager's approach as "*Gangnam Style*" football on *Match of the Day 2*, managing to confuse the 2012 hit by South Korean pop star Psy for the German word for counter-press.

3 TROMSNOW

Norwegian club Tromso IL proudly claim to be the world's northernmost professional football team, so frequently their players must be prepared to put up with freezing cold conditions. Based inside the Arctic Circle, the club recently launched their new kits for the 2022 Eliteserien season with a kickaround on their home pitch – which is currently buried under several feet of snow. The players waded through knee-deep slush to put on a five-a-side clash, which – unsurprisingly – soon descended into a snowball fight.

4 COMMENTATOR'S NIGHTMARE

The commentators for Arbroath's recent Scottish Championship fixture must have been tearing their hair out when they saw the home team line up with three Hamiltons in their starting XI – Colin, Chris and Jack. Their opponents that day at Gayfield Park? Hamilton Academical, who, incidentally, had Jamie Hamilton starting for them at right-back.

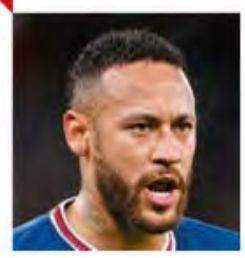
5 "LEAKY BLINDERS"

To celebrate the return of TV series *Peaky Blinders* on the BBC at the end of February, Championship club Birmingham City announced a return "to its roots for the upcoming game with Huddersfield Town", by changing their name to Small Heath Alliance – their moniker at the start of the last century – for one weekend only. However, after falling to a 2-0 home defeat at St Andrew's, the away side took the opportunity to have a brutal dig at the Blues on social media, tweeting after the game: "Three points coming home, by order of Huddersfield Town. Comfortable win on the road against The Leaky Blinders makes it 17 games unbeaten in all competitions for the Terriers!"

6 SUPER SCORPION

After four years without an A-League goal, Western United full-back Ben Garuccio finally ended his drought by scoring a brace. Not only that, the second, a stunning scorpion kick, was a contender for the Puskas award. The clip is made all the more remarkable for the commentary that accompanies it: "That's not a goal, that's a freak show!" he says, before adding: "This is Rene Higuita on steroids! I've seen it four times and I still don't believe it!"

Drought over... Ben Garuccio celebrates



"I don't know if I will play in Brazil again. I have a lot of will to play in the US, that I do want. At least for one season. The championship is quick, so there's four months of vacation"

Neymar discusses his future on the *Fenomenos* podcast

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Fresh start...Jack Wilshere in training at his new club

EUROPE

After eight months as a free agent, former England and Arsenal midfielder **JACK WILSHERE** joined Danish club AGF Aarhus. Elsewhere Levante signed left-back **MARCELO SARACCHI**, who was released by RB Leipzig in December, and former Italy forward **SEBASTIAN GIOVINCO** joined Sampdoria after leaving Saudi outfit Al Hilal.

In Italy, **DAVIDE NICOLA** replaced Stefano Colantuono as manager of Salernitana, while Ligue 1 strugglers Bordeaux appointed **DAVID GUION** as manager to replace Vladimir Petkovic.

On the final day of the Turkish transfer window, Istanbul Basaksehir signed Egypt winger **TREZEGUET** on loan from Aston Villa.

GUSTAVO POYET was appointed Greece's new head coach, while **CZESLAW MICHNIEWICZ** became manager of Poland's national team.

Ukraine international **YEVHEN KONOPLYANKA** joined Polish side Cracovia on a free transfer from Shakhtar Donetsk. Former Atletico Madrid striker **NIKOLA KALINIC** returned to his first club Hajduk Split after leaving Hellas Verona.

Arsenal confirmed that they will complete the signing of New England Revolution and USA goalkeeper **MATT TURNER** in the summer.

Shot-stopper... USA keeper Matt Turner

Former Celtic and Scotland striker **LEIGH GRIFFITHS** joined Falkirk in the Scottish third tier for the rest of the season. In the Premiership, Dundee appointed former Scotland assistant manager **MARK McGHEE**, **STEPHEN ROBINSON** left Morecambe to take change of St Mirren and Aberdeen installed **JIM GOODWIN** as manager.

In the EFL, former Preston North End boss **ALEX NEIL** took charge of League One Sunderland, while ex-Everton and Senegal striker **OUMAR NIASSE** joined fellow third-tier side Burton Albion.

AFRICA

On-loan Leicester City winger **ADEMOLA LOOKMAN**, a World Cup winner with England's Under-20s, switched his international allegiance to Nigeria, while Everton midfielder **ABDOULAYE DOUCOURE** confirmed his switch from France to Mali.

U20 World Cup winner... Lookman

ASIA

South Korean international **KOO JA-CHEOL** joined Jeju United in the K-League from Al Khor in Qatar.

Sydney FC announced the signing of former Netherlands and Swansea City winger **LUCIANO NARSINGH**. He had been without a club since leaving Feyenoord last summer.

CONCACAF

Minnesota United signed Paraguay international **LUIS AMARILLA** from Velez Sarsfield, and **JOZY ALTIDORE** completed a free transfer from Toronto FC to New England Revolution.

After a successful campaign on loan in 2021, Stoke City right-back **TOM EDWARDS** re-joined New York Red Bulls for another year. English striker **DOM DWYER** joined Atlanta United after leaving Toronto FC.

SOUTH AMERICA

Paraguay playmaker **OSCAR ROMERO** joined Boca Juniors on a free transfer, and Rosario Central signed ex-West Bromwich Albion midfielder **CLAUDIO YACOB** on loan from Huracan. Velez Sarsfield captured **SANTIAGO CASERES** permanently from Villarreal, four years after selling him to the La Liga side.

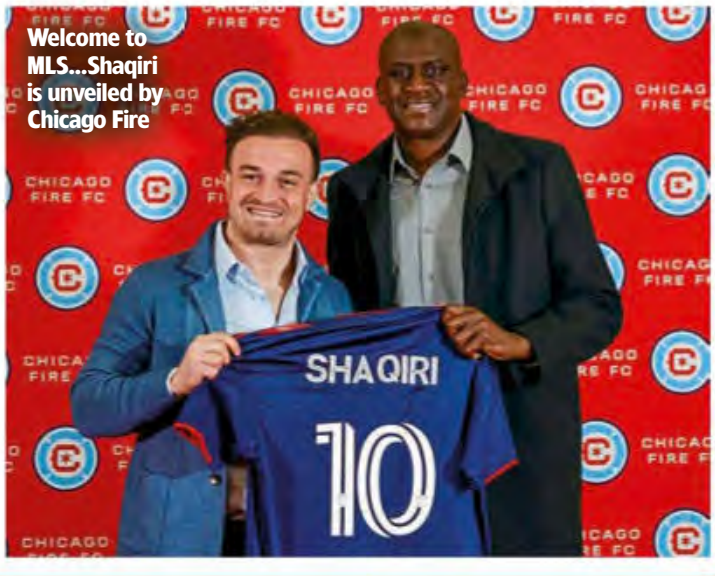
Former Lazio, West Ham United and Boca Juniors striker **MAURO ZARATE** joined Brazilian outfit Juventude.

MLS attracts more big names

Major League Soccer proved that it is still a popular destination for proven players with the arrivals of Xherdan Shaqiri and Douglas Costa.

Chicago Fire paid Lyon a club record $7.5 million for Switzerland winger Shaqiri, while Costa completed a loan move to LA Galaxy from Juventus. In the summer, Napoli hero Lorenzo Insigne will join Toronto FC.

At 31, Costa is the oldest of the trio, demonstrating that MLS is far from the "retirement league" that it was once regarded. All three have plenty still to offer, and there is hope that as the league continues to attract big names, LigaMX's dominance of the CONCACAF Champions League could soon come to an end.



Welcome to MLS...Shaqiri is unveiled by Chicago Fire

"On very high instructions from the President of the Republic, the coach of the men's national football team, Mr Antonio Conceicao, has been replaced by Rigobert Song"

Cameroon's sports minister Narcisse Mouelle Kombi announces the new coach of the Indomitable Lions

Appointments, sackings and loans

EUROPE

Leeds United fired **MARCELO BIELSA** after a poor run of form left the Premier League club in danger of relegation.

In the EFL, Reading and Peterborough United parted company with **VELJKO PAUNOVIC** and **DARREN FERGUSON**, while **KENNY JACKETT** and **DEREK ADAMS** left Leyton Orient and Bradford City respectively, with **MARK HUGHES** later being appointed at Valley Parade.

PSV's **ROGER SCHMIDT** announced he will leave the club at the end of the season, amid rumours that he will take over at Hertha Berlin. **JOHNNY JANSEN** was sacked by Heerenveen, who hired **OLE TOBIASEN** as interim coach.

JEAN-PHILIPPE GBAMIN left Everton to join CSKA Moscow on loan for the rest of the season.

AFRICA

HAKIM ZIYECH announced his retirement from international duty, having been left out of Morocco's 2021 Africa Cup of Nations squad.

Quitting... Ziyech

ASIA

Former Tottenham Hotspur, AZ, Fulham and Belgium central midfielder **MOUSA DEMBELE** announced that he will retire at the end of the current Chinese Super League season after three years with Guangzhou City.

Retiring... Dembele

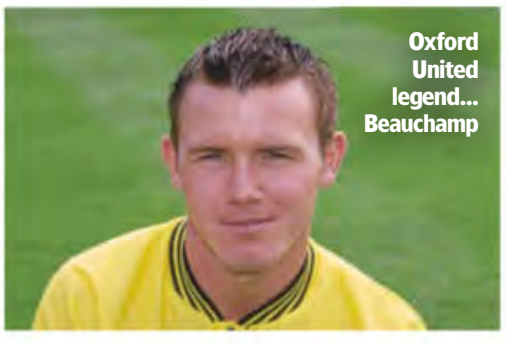
United Arab Emirates hired Argentine coach **RODOLFO ARRUABARRENA** to replace ex-Netherlands boss **BERT VAN MARWIJK**, who was fired in February.

SOUTH AMERICA

Managers **JAIR VENTURA**, **FABIO CARILLE** and **ENDERSON MOREIRA** departed Brazilian clubs Juventude, Santos and Botafogo respectively.

OBITUARIES

Joey BEAUCHAMP (1971-2022)



Oxford United legend... Beauchamp

A legend at hometown club Oxford United, Beauchamp was sold to West Ham United for £1 million in 1994 but never settled in East London and ended up back in Oxford a year later. A talented winger, he cemented his status as a cult hero over the following seven years, once scoring a goal that was voted the greatest ever in the club's history by fans in 1999. He retired in 2002 and remains fifth on Oxford's list of all-time top goalscorers.

Hector PULIDO (1942-2022)
Former Cruz Azul and Mexico midfielder who started three of his country's four games at the 1970 World Cup on home soil, winning 43 *El Tri* caps in total.

Pierluigi FROSIO (1948-2022)
A legend of Italian side Perugia, where he made over 300 appearances and captained the club to the Serie B title in 1974-75. He remained in Umbria for a decade, starring in the side that finished second in Serie A in 1978-79, before later managing the club.

Charles YOHANE (1973-2022)
A Zimbabwe international defender who starred in the nation's first-ever Africa Cup of Nations appearance in 2004.

MAURI (1934-2022)
Former Spain and Athletic Bilbao midfielder who starred in the league-winning side of 1955-56. Also won three Copas del Rey with the Basque club.

Mate FENYVESI (1933-2022)
Hungarian international who went to three World Cups between 1958 and 1966, while also scoring 164 goals in 551 games for Ferencvaros, including the winner against Juventus in the 1965 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup final. After retiring he worked as a vet and later in politics, serving as an MP from 1998 to 2006.

Burtenshaw...at Arsenal in 1970

Julio MORALES (1945-2022)
In a trophy-laden career, the Uruguay international won six league titles and two Copas Libertadores in two separate spells at Montevideo side Nacional, either side of five years at Austria Vienna, where he won two league titles and reached the European Cup Winners' Cup final in 1978. Only four players have scored more goals in Libertadores history.

Roger LAMBRECHT (1931-2022)
Colourful chairman of Belgian club Lokeren for 25 years before he sold it in 2019. *Mark Gleeson*

Steve BURTENSHAW (1935-2022)
Burtenshaw worked in football for 50 years as a player, coach, manager, scout and caretaker manager. Despite being a one-club man during his playing career at Brighton, he was best known for his work at Arsenal, where he worked first as manager of the reserves. He took temporary charge of the club in 1986 following the departure of Don Howe, and continued under George Graham as chief scout until 1996, before taking similar roles at QPR and Manchester City.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

FEBRUARY 2022

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	21
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	15
Ederson (Manchester City)	7
Alisson (Liverpool)	6
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	5
David Ospina (Napoli)	4
David de Gea (Manchester United)	3
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Walter Benitez (Nice)	1
Bono (Sevilla)	1
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	1
Mark Flekken (Freiburg)	1
Alfred Gomis (Rennes)	1
Samir Handanovic (Internazionale)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Maty Ryan (Real Sociedad)	1
Jose Sa (Wolves)	1
Yann Sommer (B. M'gladbach)	1

DEFENDERS

Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	34
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	22
Kalidou Koulibaly (Napoli)	19
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	19
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	18
Antonio Rudiger (Chelsea)	14
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	12
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Marquinhos (PSG)	10
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	10
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	9
Reece James (Chelsea)	7
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	6
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	6
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	6
Milan Skriniar (Internazionale)	6
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	5
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	5
Aymeric Laporte (Manchester City)	5
Marcos Alonso (Chelsea)	4
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	4
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Gerard Pique (Barcelona)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea)	2
Davide Calabria (Milan)	2
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	2
Matthijs de Ligt (Juventus)	2
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	2
Jules Kounde (Sevilla)	2
Joel Matip (Liverpool)	2
Mario Rui (Napoli)	2
Kieran Tierney (Arsenal)	2
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	2
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	1
Dani Alves (Barcelona)	1
Jerome Boateng (Lyon)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	1
Andreas Christensen (Chelsea)	1
Aaron Cresswell (West Ham United)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Ben Davies (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Merih Demiral (Atalanta)	1
Aritz Elustondo (Real Sociedad)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Thilo Kehrer (PSG)	1
Presnel Kimpembe (PSG)	1
Philipp Lienhart (Freiburg)	1
Lisandro Martinez (Ajax)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Thomas Meunier (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jesus Navas (Sevilla)	1
Nicolas Pallois (Nantes)	1
Jose Luis Palomino (Atalanta)	1
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	1
Boris Popovic (Cercle Brugge)	1
David Raum (Hoffenheim)	1
Mamadou Sakho (Montpellier)	1
Chris Smalling (Roma)	1
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	1
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	1
Lucas Verissimo (Benfica)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	17
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	17
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	14
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	10
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	10
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	8
Jorginho (Chelsea)	7
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	7
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	7
Pedri (Barcelona)	6
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	5
Idrissa Gueye (PSG)	5
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	5
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	5
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	5
Kai Havertz (Chelsea)	4
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	4
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	4
Marcelo Brozovic (Internazionale)	3
Fabinho (Liverpool)	3
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Rodri (Manchester City)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Marco Verratti (PSG)	3
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	2
Fabian (Napoli)	2
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	2
Declan Rice (West Ham United)	2
Thiago (Liverpool)	2
Sandro Tonali (Milan)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	1
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Philippe Coutinho (Aston Villa)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Nabil Fekir (Real Betis)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Thorgan Hazard (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jordan Henderson (Liverpool)	1
Ander Herrera (PSG)	1
Joan Jordan (Sevilla)	1
Orkun Kokcu (Feyenoord)	1
Manuel Locatelli (Juventus)	1
Lovro Majer (Rennes)	1

Joao Moutinho (Wolves)	1
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	1
Lucas Ocampos (Sevilla)	1
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Otavio (Porto)	1
Dani Parejo (Villarreal)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Dimitri Payet (Marseille)	1
Paul Pogba (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
Teji Savanier (Montpellier)	1
Aurelien Tchouameni (Monaco)	1
Youri Tielemans (Leicester City)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Axel Witsel (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	54
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	40
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	23
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	19
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	16
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	14
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	10
Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United)	5
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	5
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	4
Sebastien Haller (Ajax)	4
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	4
Sadio Mane (Liverpool)	4
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	4
Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (Barcelona)	3
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	3
Lionel Messi (PSG)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Raheem Sterling (Manchester City)	3
Karim Adeyemi (Red Bull Salzburg)	2
Amine Gouiri (Nice)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Romelu Lukaku (Chelsea)	2
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	2
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Giovanni Simeone (Verona)	2
Mehdi Taremi (Porto)	2
Duvan Zapata (Atalanta)	2
Tammy Abraham (Roma)	1
Antony (Ajax)	1
Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco)	1
Steven Berghuis (Ajax)	1
Arnaut Danjuma (Villarreal)	1
Moussa Dembele (Lyon)	1
Memphis Depay (Barcelona)	1
Moussa Diaby (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Breel Embolo (B. M'gladbach)	1
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	1
Lorenzo Insigne (Napoli)	1
Alexander Isak (Real Sociedad)	1
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Gerard Moreno (Villarreal)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

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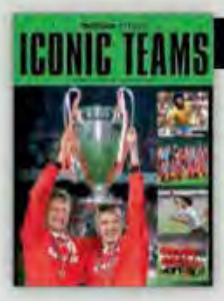

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Ghana

National team in need of a rebuild after disastrous AFCON, with World Cup play-offs imminent

When the top brass of Ghana's FA met with the president of the country, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, back in April 2021, it was specifically to discuss how to return the Black Stars to their past glory.

The outcome was an unprecedented level of spending in the national team: it was agreed that the government would provide $10 million, with corporate organisations raising a further $15 million. A chunk of this money was to fund Ghana's 2021 AFCON and 2022 World Cup campaigns.

Handshakes were exchanged and assurances were made. "Together we will bring back the love; together we will ignite passion," FA president Kurt Okraku ebulliently declared.

Before the contingent left, though, president Akufo-Addo also made his demands. "The target is to bring the cup home by winning the AFCON," he insisted. "We must also reach at least the semi-finals of the World Cup in Qatar."

The problem was that none of the decision-makers bothered to acknowledge the Black Stars' systemic decline. They all spoke like the archetypal politician, choosing to build false hopes rather than accept Ghana's newfound underdog status. Consequently, the dream behind the investment was undermined from the start.

After the Black Stars suffered a humiliating defeat against lowly-rated Comoros in their ultimate AFCON game – a result that confirmed a disappointing group-stage exit – it was evident that the political talks had once again backfired.

Ghana's performance in Cameroon was a waste of time for all parties involved: the team showed no desire, players looked confused on the pitch, and the technical brain to turn things around was non-existent.

Milovan Rajevac's return in September 2021 was supposed to provide the answers to Ghana's 40-year trophy drought and help salvage a World Cup qualifying campaign that seemed doomed. After all, the Serbian was the man who guided Ghana to the AFCON final in 2010 and the World Cup quarter-finals that same year.

Upset...Thomas Partey reacts to the AFCON defeat to Comoros

Yet Rajevac's track record since parting ways with the West African nation suggested he had lost his touch, failing in one job after another. Between 2010 and 2019 he managed five teams, only lasting more than a year in one of them – Thailand, from 2017 to 2019 – before ultimately being fired from the role.

The red flags were evident but the FA ignored them. Ghana scraped through to the World Cup qualifying play-offs, but that only papered over the cracks, with performances remaining unconvincing. The Black Stars' wins were more smash-and-grab than assured.

A 3-0 battering at the hands of Algeria in a friendly before the AFCON painted the perfect picture of Ghana's true level. Joined in Group C by Morocco, Gabon and Comoros, Ghana finished bottom of the group with a single point, marking their first group-stage exit since 2006.

Ghana's problems run deeper than just coaching. However, Rajevac proved to be a man lacking ideas. His call-ups were suspect, his in-game management necessitous, and his substitutions far worse.

Take the case of Mubarak Wakaso. He made Ghana's squad despite carrying an injury. Mohammed Kudus was also picked despite Ajax making it clear he wasn't fit. Wakaso ended up not kicking a ball all tournament, while Kudus never performed in Cameroon. Meanwhile, Celta Vigo's Victor Aidoo and Fiorentina's Alfred Duncan were left out despite their consistent performances in La Liga and Serie A, respectively.

> "The target is to bring the cup home by winning the AFCON. We must also reach at least the semi-finals of the World Cup in Qatar"
>
> Ghana president Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo in April 2021

Sacked... former coach Milovan Rajevac

Rajevac's sacking just four months after his appointment, it seems, had more to do with his incompetence than a lack of luck. Ideally, Ghana's disastrous AFCON campaign should have triggered a complete overhaul, but that has not happened.

A rebuild seems to have been relegated again, with the Black Stars set to take on West African rivals Nigeria in the play-offs for Qatar 2022 in March. Ghana may currently have an ageing squad, but a more competitive team can be fashioned around exciting talents like Kudus and Rennes' Kamaldeen Sulemana.

As promising as such a prospect looks, there is a power struggle over which path the Black Stars must walk. While the FA favours Borussia Dortmund assistant trainer Otto Addo as the next coach of the national team, the government prefers ex-Newcastle United and Brighton manager Chris Hughton, who they believe could help to convince Southampton's Mohammed Salisu and Chelsea's Callum Hudson-Odoi to play for Ghana.

Addo has since been confirmed as interim head coach for the two-legged tie against Nigeria and Hughton as technical advisor. It's a short-term arrangement that makes each party happy, but Ghana's rebuild suffers and remains shrouded by indecision, as both Addo and Hughton have different football philosophies and have been thrust into a *Game of Thrones* scenario for the top job.

It remains a mystery who will eventually get the nod permanently. But whoever it is, the Black Stars job won't get any easier.

Emmanuel Ayamga

Ghana technical adviser...Chris Hughton left Nottingham Forest in September

Antoine Semenyo

The in-form Bristol City striker could be set for an international switch

These days, it doesn't take long for the words "Viva Semenyo" to echo around Ashton Gate, home of Championship side Bristol City. Fans of the Robins haven't had much to shout about in recent years, as they head towards the end of another forgettable campaign. Yet a new crop of exciting youngsters is giving them cause for excitement – and none more so than 22-year-old forward Antoine Semenyo.

A troublesome knee injury meant the young attacker didn't start a league game until December, but since then he has been outstanding, notching six goals and seven assists in the following 12 games. It is already his best-ever season by far.

Semenyo's path to Championship stardom was far from typical or smooth. Born in London, he developed outside of the academy system, enrolling on a football course at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, whose Bristol-based campus was used as City's training ground. It was here that he caught the club's eye, and was snapped up for the academy in September 2017.

Loans at Bath City, Newport County and Sunderland produced mixed results, while regular first-team football in last season's Championship only yielded two goals and four assists.

Knee surgery followed in the summer and, although it took longer than expected to fully recover, he now looks far closer to the finished article. His pace, power and trickery have never been in doubt, but combining that with confidence, composure and sound decision-making has made him unplayable at times. In January, the Robins were humbled by Fulham in a 6-2 defeat, but Semenyo bagged both the visitors' goals, each of them from powerful solo runs followed by emphatic finishes; one left foot and one right foot.

"It might have been a blessing in disguise," he told *SkySports.com* of his injury problems, after being named the Championship Player of the Month for January. "It helped me analyse my game and get me to the point where I'm at now by implementing some new things. I'm thankful for that."

In form...Bristol City forward Semenyo

Although he's often been deployed out wide, Semenyo insists his best position is up front, comparing his style to Chelsea legend Didier Drogba.

He may well emulate his hero by playing for an African nation at a World Cup. Semenyo has reportedly held discussions with the Ghana Football Association about representing Ghana. If the Black Stars can negotiate their qualification play-off against Nigeria, it will be an extremely tempting offer for Semenyo.

> Semenyo has reportedly held discussions with the Ghana Football Association

His younger brother Jai, who made his pro debut in Cardiff City's FA Cup defeat to Liverpool in February, will also be of interest to the GFA.

By the time Qatar 2022 arrives, Antoine could well be a top-flight footballer. In January he was linked with Crystal Palace and Celtic, with further interest in the summer expected. The forward won't come cheap, with City's asking price likely to move beyond their previous record sale (Adam Webster to Brighton, £24 million) with every outstanding performance; not bad considering it was only in January 2019 that the Robins rejected a £1m bid from Chelsea for him.

For now, Bristol City fans will simply want to enjoy watching the attacker for as long as they can.

Jamie Evans

Odion Ighalo

The former Premier League striker has had an eventful few months

If any European fans were wondering what Odion Ighalo had been up to between leaving Manchester United in January 2021 and then facing Chelsea at the FIFA Club World Cup just over a year later, the answer is quite a lot.

After his one-year loan move from Shanghai Shenhua to Old Trafford ended with little fanfare, the Nigeria striker joined Al Shabab of Saudi Arabia in February 2021. His time in the Middle East has been a big success.

The 32-year-old arrived halfway through the season and scored nine goals in 13 league games to help Al Shabab finish second in the league behind Al Hilal, who became national champions for the 17th time. It also helped the former Udinese, Granada and Watford striker become a fan favourite. "He is a player who always wants to score goals, is focused on scoring goals but also works hard for the team," said Al Shabab coach Carlos Inarejos. "He fitted in straight away."

The 2021-22 Saudi Professional League season started in August with Al Shabab looking to go one better and win a first title since 2012. Ighalo picked up where he left off under new coach Pericles Chamusca. With one point from the first three games, the Brazilian was in danger of dismissal; this is Saudi Arabia after all, a league with one of the highest firing rates in the world, with three managers losing their job inside the first month of the season.

Then the African started to link up well with Argentine Ever Banega and the goals started to flow. Ighalo scored both goals in a 2-0 win over Al Ettifaq, the first victory of the season in September, and the team was off and running. The unbeaten streak had reached 15 games early in 2022 with Ighalo emerging as the top scorer in the entire league – no mean feat in a competition featuring some top African strikers such as Cameroon's Vincent Aboubakar of Al Nassr, Al Hilal's Malian marksman Moussa Marega and Abderazzak Hamdallah, Al Ittihad's Moroccan hotshot.

Al Shabab fans were expecting to be without Ighalo for a few weeks in January and February due to the African Cup of Nations. The striker had been top scorer at the 2019 tournament and had subsequently retired from the Nigerian national team, only to be recalled on the eve of the 2021 edition.

Club World Cup... Ighalo holds off Chelsea defender Andreas Christensen

Yet the club refused to release their star man, saying, in a similar fashion to Watford and Emmanuel Dennis, that the Nigerian Football Federation had made the official request too late.

"The FIFA Player Status Regulations stipulates that the federation must notify the player and his club in writing of his summons 15 days before the start of the tournament, and it is advised to send a copy to the local federation of the club as well, which did not happen," Al Shabab official Majid Al Marzouki said. "There are no negotiations between us and the Nigerian federation, and the player is committed to the decision. The situation is settled."

> Ighalo did not make it to Cameroon, despite rumours that he was keen to represent the Super Eagles

"Hopefully Odion will come," said Augustine Eguavoen, Nigeria's interim coach who was appointed in December to take over from the sacked Gernot Rohr. "The only thing is to change the style of play because the personnel is not there as we expected."

Yet Eguavoen's hopes fell on deaf ears, and Ighalo did not make it to Cameroon, despite rumours that he was keen to represent the Super Eagles. Only he knows the truth for sure, but his goal against Al Fateh on January 20 proved to be his final appearance for Al Shabab.

There had been reports of interest from Al Hilal, the defending champions who had won a record fourth Asian Champions League just weeks earlier. Initially they were dismissed but the Blues were determined to find a striker to replace Bafetimbi Gomis. The Frenchman scored over 100 goals in three and a half seasons and was the top scorer in the 2019 AFC Champions League as Hilal won the continental title. The former Swansea and Lyon star was a fan favourite but it was felt that, at 36, his powers were fading and he went back to Galatasaray. With the Club World Cup looming, the Asian champions moved quickly to sign Ighalo.

His debut appearance came at the Club World Cup with a goal against Al Jazira of the United Arab Emirates in a 6-1 thrashing. Al Hilal may have narrowly lost to Chelsea in the next game but with Ighalo looking good, there should be silverware coming his way before long.

John Duerden

Saudi Arabia women

History is made as the Middle Eastern country's first-ever women's international takes place

On Sunday February 20, Saudi Arabia beat Seychelles 2-0 in the Maldivian capital of Male and received a message of congratulations from Pele. "I want to congratulate the [Saudi Arabia Football Federation] and their Women's National Football Team for their first-ever official [FIFA] match," the Brazilian wrote on social media.

Al Bandari Mubarak will always have the honour of being the first-ever goalscorer for the female Green Falcons, netting as she did after 14 minutes, with Maryan Al Tamimi adding a second from the penalty spot early in the second half.

A first win was welcome, but there is a long way to go in a country that has little history of women playing the game. In Asia, teams from the east have been dominant: Japan were world champions in 2011 and China won a ninth Asian title in February. There has been little impact made from the western side of the giant continent but the aim in Riyadh is to change all that and make it to a World Cup at some point in the next decade.

For now though, the priority is just to play. Unsurprisingly given the lack of experience in the country, a top coach has been drafted in to help. Monika Staab played for Paris-Saint Germain, Southampton and Queens Park Rangers before leading Frankfurt to the UEFA Champions League (then known as the UEFA Women's Cup) in 2002. With experience of working in the Middle East with Qatar and Bahrain, the German was seen as the perfect choice and didn't take much persuading when the call came in 2021.

> "I hope that women's football will move forward in Saudi Arabia in general, and that women will be able to play football abroad, just like the men's teams"
>
> Seba Rabea Tawfiq, Saudi Arabian international

"In November last year, my phone rang and I saw that it was a 966 country code and had no idea who it was," Staab said upon her appointment last August. "I thought to myself: 'Come on, what have you got to lose?' And then the person said: 'This is the Saudi Arabian Football Association'. I thought that nothing could ever surprise me and then this came along."

A national team needs a foundation. The Department of Women's Football Development was born in 2019 and in the same year the first domestic competitions were held. In November 2021, the first regional league kicked off. This saw 16 teams split among three regions: central, western and eastern with the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam acting as the respective hubs.

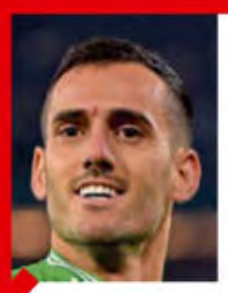
Seba Rabea Tawfiq played for Jeddah Eagles, who reached the semi-finals. "I hope that women's football will move forward in Saudi Arabia in general, and that women will be able to play football abroad, just like the men's teams," she said. "If God wishes, we will make progress as female players and represent our home country like women elsewhere. Then, football will become ordinary for girls as it is for boys."

There has been vocal support from FIFA boss Gianni Infantino and, as well as getting the local leagues on a secure footing and getting a classification from the world's governing body, the first major aim is to qualify for the 2026 Women's Asian Cup. Even with the recent expansion of the tournament from eight to 12 teams, it will be far from easy for such a young team but Staab sees the game with the Seychelles, as well as the Maldives three days later, as just the start.

"Enjoy every single minute, every second that you will experience in that historical moment," the 63-year-old said. "Be proud of being part of the squad of 25. Try your best and give everything for Saudi Arabia. It is an honour for you to be there. Take this opportunity as this is one of the most historical moments in women's football in Saudi Arabia." There may be more to come.

John Duerden

History makers... Saudi Arabia's coach Monika Staab during a training session



Juanmi

Real Betis' polished diamond is helping *Los Verdiblancos'* push for a top-four finish

Real Betis have been one of La Liga's outstanding sides this season. The team is full of headline acts such as Nabil Fekir, Sergio Canales and Joaquin. Yet alongside those big names and talismanic stars has been a more surprising success story: Juan Miguel Jimenez Lopez, aka Juanmi.

Juanmi has been among the top scorers in La Liga all season. By the end of January he had scored 12 goals, beating his best-ever league tally of 11, scored for Real Sociedad in 2016-17. For further context, his previous two seasons at Real Betis yielded just five goals in all competitions.

Now, with 16 goals in his first 26 matches, the striker is enjoying a rich vein of form that has not always looked to be on the cards.

The 28-year-old, from Coin, Malaga, has gone under the radar since his €8 million move to the Seville-based side in 2019. But what does he bring to the party? What is his skillset?

Juanmi is not your average prototype striker like colleagues Borja Iglesias and Willian Jose. He brings something different to the Real Betis forward line, an added dimension. He is a hybrid hitman, a winger who can lead the line too.

He is adept at finding space at crucial moments, sniffing out opportunities. His game intelligence allied with his quick turn of pace adds to his weaponry, while his adaptability can be aptly demonstrated with the different types of goals he scores: left foot, right foot, headers, long-range strikes or tap-ins. His trickery means he can control the ball in tight spaces and wriggle out of opponents' grasp. Above all else, it is his high work ethic that especially endears him to supporters. He is consistently one of the team's hardest workers, buzzing around opponents with tenacity, chasing the ball like an angry dog with a bone.

In form...Juanmi celebrates another La Liga goal for Betis

> Juanmi's Betis career got off to the worst possible start, picking up an injury that effectively ended his season in September. By the time he returned to first-team action, it was to empty stadiums under the shadow of COVID

Which begs the question: why has it taken him so long to deliver consistently in La Liga?

Juanmi's Betis career got off to the worst possible start, picking up an injury to his left foot that effectively ended his season in September. By the time he returned to first-team action, it was to empty stadiums under the shadow of COVID.

It was a long rehabilitation process that sapped his confidence and left him mentally drained. When he returned, Betis never saw his true potential, though he hardly helped his cause by being sent off in the penultimate game of the season, ruling him out of the start of the 2020-21 campaign. Another injury arrived in the autumn, meaning that he went on to start just five league games across the whole season.

This season however, started far better, as Juanmi opened his account on his first start, a 1-1 draw with Cadiz. A month later he scored a brace against Celtic in the Europa League, and in November scored the first hat-trick of his career against Levante. Afterwards, he acknowledged that he was enjoying a sweet moment

Premier League flop...Juanmi failed to scored in 12 Southampton appearances

and felt the confidence of his team-mates and manager.

Indeed, Manuel Pellegrini has undoubtedly played a key role in unlocking Juanmi's potential. The Betis boss knows him well, having handed him his debut as a 16-year-old while the pair were at Malaga. He scored in that Copa del Rey match too, becoming the club's youngest ever goalscorer.

Later that year, the young forward made history again, when his two strikes against Real Zaragoza made him the youngest player in La Liga history to score a brace. Back then, Malaga were a force in the top flight, fielding the likes of Ruud van Nistelrooy, Santi Cazorla, Isco and current team-mate Joaquin, and reaching their first Champions League in 2012-13.

Juanmi was seemingly set for stardom from the beginning, starting his career in the spotlight of that star-studded Malaga side. But his career went off-track with an ill-fated season in England with Southampton in 2015-16, where he failed to score in 12 Premier League appearances.

He has had to work hard to hone his craft and overcome his fitness woes to achieve his optimal level.

The striker spoke of his injury nightmare, that many things went through his head and it was not easy to process. Nor was his difficult road to recovery: suffering from anxieties, lacking in rhythm and losing his spark. But all credit to him he has fully recuperated and is firing on all cylinders. His love for football shining through once again.

It has been a rollercoaster journey, from exciting teenage starlet to forgotten man, and now a Real Betis hero. The club's fans know exactly what he has been through, and have shown their love with a new song: "*Oh Juan Miguel, todos queremos que marque Juan Miguel*," – Oh Juan Miguel, we all want Juan Miguel to score.

The 28-year-old is certainly playing the best football of his career; his exploits mean his Real Betis side are flying high in La Liga. And in Juanmi, the club has its polished jewel.

David Whitworth

UNA Strassen

A club punching above its weight in Luxembourg – and perhaps soon Europe

Strassen is a town of almost 8,500 inhabitants, placed in the heart of Luxembourg, near the capital city. UNA Strassen, the town's football club, will celebrate their centenary this year, but they are not among the traditional nobility of Luxembourg football. Their first season in the top flight was in 2015-16, when they finished a very unexpected fifth, having been predicted to be involved in a relegation battle.

At the heart of their impressive growth is Luc Hilger, the club president. He was a midfielder in the club's youth team, before later returning for the final season of his career. "He joined the committee immediately and, from that moment, came the idea of making UNA an important club," recalls Jempy Luchetti, chief of the club's youth system and a former captain. "We were in the third level of Luxembourg football – look where we are now!"

An unbeaten run of 12 matches, from September to February has, in spite of some patchy recent form, allowed UNA to compete for a place in Europe for the first time in their history.

"We changed all the technical backroom staff but we couldn't be sure that everything would immediately go in the right direction," says Luchetti. "But with the arrival of seven or eight new important players in the squad, that leap forward has come immediately".

One of the new recruits is French goalkeeper Koray Ozcan: "We never thought about our unbeaten streak," he says. "Our surprising season comes from a better defence. Conceding fewer goals.

"Our coach helps us to keep our heads on our shoulders. It's just the beginning."

For now Luchetti remains philosophical about the team's chances of a league title: "Honestly, I think that winning the league would be a miracle, not reachable for us at the moment," he says sincerely. "But never say never."

Nevertheless, there is plenty of ambition at the club.

"In two years, Strassen municipality will provide us a new stadium. Then we will add a second training ground to the one we've already built, where almost 300 young players and the first team train.

"With this infrastructure and the very good job we're already doing with our youth system, we'll be able to settle among the top clubs in our country".

> "Honestly, I think that winning the league would be a miracle, not reachable for us at the moment. But never say never"
>
> **Jempy Luchetti, head of UNA Strassen's academy**

Football in Luxembourg is amateur, and Hilger and the rest of the board are opposed to any suggestion of introducing professionalism to the country. Luchetti explains: "Luxembourg is too small for a professional league. Our talents go abroad when they are aged 12-16: we don't have the critical mass for such a project".

As an example, Bosnia midfielder Miralem Pjanic, who is currently on loan at Besiktas from Barcelona, grew up in Luxembourg before going on to have a successful career abroad. More recently, the Thill brothers – Sebastien, Olivier and Vincent – are among the latest generation of Luxembourgish footballers who are impressing all over Europe.

For UNA Strassen, professionalism remains some way off. European qualification however, is very much a possibility.

Emanuele Giulianelli

Underdogs...UNA are flying high
fcuna-strassen.lu

eyewitness

Peterjon Cresswell reports

HUNGARY

The Hungarian outsiders taking on Budapest's big boys

Kisvarda FC are a club on a mission

A freezing February night in Budapest. European evergreens Ujpest have just netted a sublime free-kick on the final whistle to win a bitterly cold Hungarian Cup tie at the death. Having chased shadows for most of the game, the players in lilac run towards the raucous home end. Having been defeated in such heart-breaking fashion, their opponents Kisvarda would have been forgiven for disappearing from the pitch to grab a warm and welcome shower, and catch the long bus back to a distant corner of Hungary.

Not a bit of it. Even with no away fans to play up to, Kisvarda coach Gabor Eros arranges his men in a post-match huddle right out on the Ujpest pitch and cajoles them, his words barely heard above the din of rare lilac euphoria.

Three days later, on an even colder night, COVID-hit Kisvarda returned to battle for a 0-0 draw with an Ujpest side scrapping to avoid a first relegation since 1911. That precious point also enabled the visitors to leapfrog champions Ferencvaros in the table, put ten points of daylight between them and fourth-placed Fehervar and bring European qualification a step closer.

If Ujpest have their tradition, Kisvarda have their mission. "I said at the start of the season that our aim is to notch up 16 league wins," explains Kisvarda sporting director Attila Revesz. "Whether that leaves us in second, third or fourth, we'll see in May." Last season, 16 wins were enough to push Fehervar into the Europa Conference League.

Representing a little-visited town of 17,000 people, Kisvarda only reached the top flight in 2018. Before then, as Gabor Eros and Attila Revesz will tell you, this was a little club lingering in the lower leagues. Both in their 40s and boasting a combined total of 20 years at unsung Kisvarda, Revesz and Eros are now on the cusp of achieving something quite remarkable. Seven-time champions Debrecen used to hoover up floating support in north-east Hungary, but now something is stirring here in the borderlands.

A look at the Kisvarda squad shows relatively few Hungarians but also no Africans and only one solitary South American. Usually agents provide Hungarian clubs with plenty of cheap talent from the southern hemisphere, but not here. Ukrainians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Albanians and Montenegrins also play in a highly-cosmopolitan squad, handpicked by an expert scouting network across the Balkans and, in particular, Ukraine.

This is no coincidence, and not just because Kisvarda is almost walking distance from Ukraine. Revesz also runs MFA Mukachevo, a Ukrainian third-tier club based in a region that was once a part of Hungary. "Our senior team has just reached the third tier," says Revesz of his Ukrainian activities. "But our junior side is in the top division for its age category, playing against the likes of Dynamo Kiev and Shakhtar Donetsk. I often go with them and attend youth tournaments across the region."

Varkerti Stadion... home of Kisvarda FC
Kisvardafc.Hu

> "When I first came here to take over as coach in 2011, Kisvarda were in the fourth tier. I saw potential in the club but I knew we needed backing"
>
> **Kisvarda sporting director Attila Revesz**

Born in Tuzser, halfway between Kisvarda and the border, Revesz is the driving force behind this quiet revolution at Kisvarda. "When I first came here to take over as coach in 2011, Kisvarda were in the fourth tier," remembers Revesz. "I saw potential in the club but I knew we needed backing. I gathered a group of local businessmen, old friends of mine, and we agreed to set up an investment fund together. We built up slowly, the team, the facilities, and climbed into

NBIII, then NBII. The same core group is still in place today".

Three other factors are now tipping the balance in Kisvarda's favour. The first is chicken. The main sponsor from the early days, local poultry producers Master Good have grown with the club, in a model example of how such a relationship can benefit both parties. Officially named Kisvarda Master Good FC, the club may soon spread the word across Europe. The chicken suppliers, meanwhile, have advertising posters across the metro stations of Budapest and ads on Hungarian TV. This, after all, is a country of carnivores and major agricultural enterprises. Nobody even knew what Master Good was before 2018.

The second factor is Kisvarda's new stadium, the Varkerti Stadion, opened in 2018. The ground features an equally new hotel alongside it, augmenting the town's limited stock

United... Kisvarda stars gather during the Ujpest defeat *Kisvardafc.Hu*

Partner club...Ukrainian side MFA Mukachevo
mfa-munkach.com.ua

of accommodation and giving visiting teams, and young trialists, a comfortable, convenient base away from home.

While construction costs (2.5 billion Hungarian florins, or €7.25 million), raised eyebrows, Revesz is quick to point out that the club was an early beneficiary of attractive tax breaks. Debrecen's Nagyerdei Stadion has only once welcomed a full house of 20,000 – for an international played there when it opened. Kisvarda's is seven times smaller. "We feel that the 3,000 capacity we have is realistic for our needs," says Revesz. "We could stage the first round of European fixtures here, then move any later ones to Debrecen."

The third element is head coach Gabor Eros. That cold night at Ujpest, while Eros patrolled the touchline barking instructions, Revesz was right behind him on the bench. As an industrious midfielder, Eros had 20 years in the professional game, at Ferencvaros, Honved and across Greece and Bulgaria. Revesz has the UEFA Pro Licence for coaching. "When I came home from six years playing abroad, I thought I would be pretty settled back in Gyor," says Eros, whose roots lie in western Hungary. "But then Attila outlined his plans he had for Kisvarda and they seemed attractive, so I came here."

That was in 2014. Eros saw out his playing career at Kisvarda while learning the ropes of coaching. "We got promotion to the second tier, I was still scoring a few goals, then I became assistant coach. For me, it has been a long, gradual development, promotion from NBII, surviving the first season in the top division, then fifth place last season."

Not that there haven't been a few bumps in the road. Still without his full coaching licence, Eros was overlooked for Joao Janeiro at the start of the 2021-22 campaign. After the Portuguese trainer was lured away by DAC, the leading Hungarian-run club in Slovakia, rumours swirled around Kisvarda as to his replacement. Revesz even invited former Romanian international Adrian Mutu to Kisvarda but, on Christmas Eve, the club announced that Eros would be taking up the post.

In form...Kisvarda are on course for European qualification
Kisvardafc.Hu

Eight games later, including that 0-0 draw away to Ujpest, Kisvarda were still unbeaten in NBI under Eros, and aiming for those 16 wins for the season.

> The downside of Kisvarda's remarkable rise is the fact that the bigger clubs in Budapest will no doubt lure away their best talents; the rough diamonds unearthed around the Balkans

Eros is a players' manager. When he went out for that post-match exhortation on the pitch at Ujpest,

he didn't need an interpreter. "The common language is English," he explains. "Our goalkeeping coach speaks English, the team talks are all in English. I also understand when they're talking Ukrainian or Serbian to each other." Fluent in Greek and Bulgarian, Eros is very much part of Kisvarda's scouting structure. "When we look at a player, we don't only think about his technical qualities but how he is as a person. Will he fit in? Can he become part of the team here?"

For the most part, the answer has been yes. Jasir Asani, Driton Camaj and Claudiu Bumba, former Under-21 internationals for Albania, Montenegro and Romania respectively, have been driving the midfield, setting up and scoring the goals. Defensive midfielder Bohdan Melnyk represented Ukraine at various youth levels. Romanian right-back Andrei Peteleu won two league titles with CFR Cluj.

The downside of Kisvarda's remarkable rise is the fact that the bigger clubs in Budapest will no doubt lure away their best talents; the rough diamonds unearthed around the Balkans. "When we talk to a player, we tell him what we have here at Kisvarda," says Eros. "But we don't try to sell him something we're not. We're not Budapest, we're a small town. We can't compete with a Ferencvaros on that level. Here, he can concentrate on his football and become a better player. Another club might come in for him and offer more money, but we already plan for that eventuality."

The club has its own academy – two of its graduates made the Hungarian national squad at youth levels – but it was only set up two years ago. "This is the direction we want to go in," says Revesz. "But again, the bigger clubs are ahead of us, their academies now in place for five or ten years. We can't produce quality Hungarian players overnight, it takes time."

For 2022-23, with the Hungarian FA looking at player quotas for foreign players, Kisvarda may have to look closer to home to continue their progression. Until then, their band of multinationals can continue to ruffle a few feathers in Budapest.

Influential... Kisvarda head coach Gabor Eros *Kisvardafc.Hu*

eyewitness

Mark Pitman reports

WALES

Welsh football looking up

"It's an exciting time for Wales and Welsh football," stated national team manager Rob Page following the World Cup play-off draw. Page was discussing his side's preparations to take on Austria, with a potential final against Scotland or Ukraine on the line, but his statement applies across the board. The Football Association of Wales (FAW) is implementing an ambitious programme of change to make a difference to the country as a whole, as well as the men's first team.

"The incentive is there for us," added Page. "We've given ourselves a great opportunity and it's all there to play for." The Dragons' only previous appearance at the World Cup was back in 1958, and this is the first time that the nation has reached the play-offs since. Home advantage for both fixtures is significant for Wales, and the power of an intense Cardiff City Stadium atmosphere cannot be underestimated when the first bars of "*Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*" fire up the red wall.

Page has proved his worth since taking over from Ryan Giggs in November 2020, completing a successful Nations League campaign and guiding his country through to the knockout stages at Euro 2020. A proud and passionate Welshman from Tylorstown in the Rhondda valley, the former Under-21 manager worked with a number of the current squad through their formative years, and his Young Dragons have formed an exciting partnership with established stars Aaron Ramsey and talismanic captain Gareth Bale.

But this latest opportunity is only possible through a long-term investment and development into the national team structure. The pathway system has prepared young players for senior international football ahead of their years. What started through necessity with John Toshack over 15 years ago was taken forward by the late Gary Speed and Chris Coleman with great success. Qualifying for Euro 2016 and reaching the semi-finals set high expectations, while competing on the world stage is an ambition not restricted to just the men's team.

Significant investment into the women's game over the last decade has put the side in serious contention for a place at the 2023 Women's World Cup. Manager Gemma Grainger has helped take forward the strong foundations laid by predecessors Jarmo Matikainen and Jayne Ludlow, and the Welsh public have bought into her positive tactical approach. With record crowds getting behind the side in the current campaign, a first major tournament appearance is clearly on the horizon.

But such ambitions are not restricted to matters on the field, and new FAW CEO Noel Mooney has made an immediate impression since his appointment in August 2021 at the third-oldest association in the world. Predecessor Jonathan Ford delivered the UEFA Super Cup in 2014 as well as the both the men and women's Champions League finals in 2017, while consecutive Euro final appearances in 2016 and 2020 justified the investment into the elite side of the game.

Maintaining this standard remains high on the agenda for Mooney, but the affable Irishman has a clear aim to deliver success far beyond the confines of the professional game.

"My time here will be focused on making us one of the best associations in the world," the former UEFA Head of Strategic Development told *World Soccer* exclusively recently. Mooney has a clear vision for the future as he explained in detail the areas of change that will ▸

adidas

United...the Welsh players gather after beating Turkey at Euro 2020

deliver these strategic aims.

"What we're trying to do is push forward with a very big programme of supporting our clubs to build spaces that are not just for football, but wellness spaces, allowing clubs to become a hub in the community," he explained. "We want to improve the mental and physical health of people in Wales through grassroots facilities. We are striking a very strong chord with the Welsh Government and we're demonstrating our social return on investment. We currently have over 100,000 registered players and that's worth over £550m to the country."

A former League of Ireland goalkeeper, Mooney has a clear understanding of the demands and challenges faced by domestic clubs, but he also appreciates their importance to the local community. He has travelled across Wales to visit clubs and meet the dedicated volunteers who enable them to survive, and he has become emotionally invested through the individual stories that he has heard.

"I'm more enthused now than ever because of the number of communities and clubs we touch," he added. "We have around 950 clubs and there's a great passion to move forward. I also feel that there are a lot of people attracted to us that would like to be a part of our journey. That's really encouraging, and wherever we go there's a great sense of progressiveness. We will do things that are right for Welsh football."

The "Our Wales" strategic plan documents what the FAW plan to deliver over the next five years and is underpinned by sustainability, equality, diversity and inclusion while continuing to promote the Welsh language. Mooney has welcomed the independent organisational review of the association that was commissioned before his appointment together with the Welsh Government's Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. "There are parts in the independent review which are absolutely critical to making us one of the best football associations in the world," he explained. "Adapting the Future Generations Act to football is really important.

"Thought leadership was something very much in my mind when I arrived as we want to be a thought leader. Our role is much wider than putting on matches, and it's about improving the health of the nation." International support has also been gained as Mooney and FAW president Steve Williams have had the opportunity to present the strategic plan to both UEFA chief Aleksander Ceferin and FIFA head Gianni Infantino already this year.

"We need a gender balance in terms of our volunteers and we need more of the BAME community involved," Mooney explained. "We've doubled our staff in terms of recruiting and retaining match officials, so we're working through the issues. Our facilities at Hensol, Dragon Park and Colliers Park are all elite facilities, but this new phase is very

Chasing history... Wales Women could reach their first-ever World Cup

> "We don't budget to qualify for major tournaments…if we were to qualify for the World Cup this year for example, the vast majority of the revenue generated will be put back into the grassroots game"
>
> **FAW chief executive Noel Mooney**

much about the towns and villages around Wales and building sustainable clubs of substance that can attract more players with better facilities."

The joint-bid with England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to host Euro 2028 will also define Mooney's tenure with the FAW. "I think there's something special about hosting a tournament," he added. "If we are successful for 2028, and I firmly believe we will be, we will have five years to build up to that which brings a lot of interest from different parties."

Domestically, the national league has made significant progress since its formation in 1992, but the current coefficient rating has resulted in a loss of a European place next season, which will have a negative financial impact for its clubs. Meanwhile, a re-launch and rebrand of the women's top division and feeder leagues offers early signs of a positive future.

One boost for the JD Cymru Premier in recent years has been the arrival of three members of Chris Coleman's Euro 2016 squad in Dave Edwards, Jazz Richards and David Cotterill. "It's probably the biggest sense of belonging I've ever had at a football club," former Wolverhampton Wanderers midfielder Edwards told *BBC Radio Wales Sport* when he signed for Bala Town last summer. "The team spirit is something I've never experienced like this before and the togetherness of everyone at the club from top to bottom."

The league has made a positive impression on Edwards, and a phased approach to investment means that the top flight is part of the long-term strategy. "I've met a lot of good people involved in the Cymru Premier," explained Mooney. "I have a lot of experience of working with national leagues and making them a lot better, and it still has a long way to go to get where it needs to be. It faces its own challenges, and the coefficient tells its own story.

"I've tried to be very clear with the clubs. Our focus now is on the grassroots game, but we have to make sure that investment benefits the top divisions too. So we have to be very strategic about how we connect the community with the Cymru Premier. The key for me is getting grant money out there and showing places being built, and that will inspire other clubs to come forward."

Meanwhile, the immediate attention turns to the World Cup play-offs, and success on the field could have a significant benefit for clubs across Wales. "We don't budget to qualify for major tournaments," Mooney added. "Our business plan does not include qualification. But if we were to qualify for the World Cup this year for example, the vast majority of the revenue generated will be put back into the grassroots game."

Now it's time for Wales to deliver on the field, with a happier and healthier nation ready to celebrate success off it.

On the up...Welsh Premier League side Bala Town

eye witness

Ryan Baldi reports

ENGLAND

Made in Hale End

The sight of 21-year-old Emile Smith Rowe racing away from the breached Tottenham Hotspur goal in jubilant celebration, closely trailed by 20-year-old team-mate and close friend Bukayo Saka, who'd just assisted the midfielder's opening strike in the North London derby, will remain etched in the minds of Arsenal supporters for years to come.

The game, in September 2021, was just 12 minutes old when Smith Rowe struck. He turned provider a quarter of an hour later, bursting through the inside-left channel before cutting back for Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

Then, on 34 minutes, Saka had a goal of his own, collecting a careful pass from his pal before driving forward and finishing low past Spurs keeper Hugo Lloris. That Tottenham pulled back a goal in the second half did little to dampen Arsenal's spirits. A 3-1 derby victory was secured, made sweeter for its hometown glory.

"It's made in Hale End," Saka told *BBC Radio 5 Live* of his and Smith Rowe's fine-tuned link-up, referencing the club's academy base in north-east London. "I'm so happy for him.

"We spoke on Saturday about what it would feel like to score in a North London derby because we both grew up supporting Arsenal, then watching these games as an academy player and wanting to be involved. It's a special feeling."

It brought a special feeling to the Arsenal supporters in attendance and watching around the world, too. Few things galvanise a fanbase quite like the emergence of a fearless homegrown youngster. So to see two graduates of the Gunners' academy star in a demolition of their local rivals on that ecstatic afternoon sparked hazy reverie of what the future might hold. Something must be going very right at Hale End.

Per Mertesacker was announced as Arsenal's new academy manager while he was still an active player for the club, appointed by then-manager Arsene Wenger and chief executive Ivan Gazidis, who has since left for Milan. The towering World Cup winner assumed full-time control of the Gunners' youth system at the end of the 2017-18 season, following his retirement.

In three and a half years, Mertesacker has overseen the first-team promotions of Saka and Smith Rowe – who debuted for the senior side just months after the new academy manager took charge – as well as a handful of hugely promising players following in their wake, such as Ben Cottrell, Folarin Balogun and gifted midfielder Charlie Patino.

The London-born pair of Saka and Smith Rowe have been with Arsenal since they were aged seven and ten, respectively, so the bulk of their development pre-dates Mertesacker's appointment. Upon his arrival at Hale End, the 37-year-old recognised the fine work already done. There was no revolution required, only evolution.

"I wanted to challenge the current academy, the people, with something new, a new framework," Mertesacker tells *World Soccer*. "Not necessarily that everything changes, but a new framework with new pillars, with a new vision. I had certain ideas that I wanted to implement. But first and foremost, I wanted to build on the great legacy that the Arsenal academy has always had."

That legacy stretches back a long way, before Saka and Smith Rowe were even born. Arsenal's successful teams of the late 1980s, '90s and early 2000s had at their core a number of homegrown stars, from legendary captain Tony Adams to ▸

Hale End graduates... Smith Rowe and Saka

Telepathic...Saka and Smith Rowe

"the Romford Pele" Ray Parlour; from David Rocastle and Paul Merson to Ashley Cole and Cesc Fabregas.

"You go back to Paul Merson, all these kinds of players, they have been in and around the academy in the club," Mertesacker says. "There was always this kind of strong legacy at Arsenal Football Club of giving young players a chance and a platform. Cesc Fabregas, Jack Wilshere and even Alex Iwobi, where no one believed he has got the potential to play in the Premier League – all these examples build a foundation and inspiration for us all to work towards."

And no one's individual legacy is more indelible than Arsene Wenger's. The Frenchman reshaped the club during his 22 years at the helm, and throughout the highs and lows of his tenure, a trust in young talent remained a theme.

"[He put] the emphasis on the academy and building strong young players who were able to contribute," Mertesacker explains of his old boss' influence. "That was always his plan. My responsibility is to build on that legacy that there is a belief in youngsters, that there is a belief in certain aspects of development. The vision to build strong young individuals who can then develop, who have pathways in the world, that is built on the foundation, the belief of Arsene Wenger."

> "Bukayo is a generational talent. That happens once in ten years. That's Cesc Fabregas. That's Jack Wilshere. And that's Bukayo Saka"
>
> **Per Mertesacker, Arsenal academy manager**

Out on the training pitches at Hale End, Arsenal's academy players – particularly within the youngest age groups – are encouraged to emulate the great names of the club's past and present. The confidence with which Saka and Smith Rowe take on opponents can be traced back to years of drills aimed at honing close control and dribbling skills. The young Gunners are shown how to "entice to eliminate" opponents by deliberately taking a touch that encourages a defender to make a challenge so the player on the ball can deploy a quick skill move to sweep past them.

Academy boss... Per Mertesacker

And there is a menu of such skill moves from which the players select, many of which are named after first-team stars. During their journey through the academy, for example, Saka and Smith Rowe might have been taught to deploy an "Ox stepover", named after Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, a "Sanchez roll" or an "Ozil L-turn".

"To get buy-in from the kids, they categorise these moves and techniques

with a player's name," explains Paul Barry, a foundation phase coach at Hale End between 2017 and 2021.

"We'd say at the beginning of a session: 'Right, today we're going to work on the Ozil, then we're going to combine that with an Ox.' It was to imprint these moves on the kids' brains, and we'd combine it with an element of pressure, so they learn when to use these moves and when not to."

There is a fine balance between pointing to first-team figures for inspiration and imbuing the youngest academy players with a false sense of destiny, though. The attrition rates within football academies are sky-high. Only 0.5 per cent of players at the Under-9 level will ever go on to make a senior appearance for their club. Mertesacker espouses a holistic approach to development, with the aim of ensuring Arsenal's youngsters are enriched by their time spent with the club, regardless of whether they have a professional future in the game.

To that end, he introduced his "four pillars" approach to development, encompassing team play, physical agility, a prioritisation of education, and a dedicated mindset. Mertesacker says he wants to create "strong young Gunners", equipping the players under his care with the skills to thrive within or outside of the game.

"It is still a fairly ruthless business," he says. "We're trying to make sure that the players that come in understand the journey. There is a lot to be achieved, but there's a lot of bumpiness in the road. We give everyone in this academy a good chance to create their own pathway, whether that's in football or not.

"It's to be honest, as well, with our Under-8 parents, to say: 'Listen, less than one per cent make it to be a Bukayo Saka; less than one per cent make it to be an Emile Smith Rowe.' We're trying to educate them along the way to make sure that they use football as a vehicle, to have values and to have the hunger and thirst to constantly learn.

"A lot of dreams will be burst at some stage. Basically everyone gets released from football. I did. There's life after being released as a footballer. We're always keen on developing lifelong learners. You don't let players off the hook if they can kick the ball around. That won't be enough, especially in the future. There's a huge emphasis on the education side of things. That's our responsibility. And that would always be a key theme for people like Arsene Wenger. It's the same message."

HALE END GRADUATES

Folarin **BALOGUN**, *Middlesbrough (on loan from Arsenal)*
Hector **BELLERIN**, *Real Betis (on loan from Arsenal)*
Ismael **BENNACER**, *Milan*
Josh **DASILVA**, *Brentford*
Eberechi **EZE**, *Crystal Palace*

Serge **GNABRY**, *Bayern Munich*

Isaac **HAYDEN**, *Newcastle United*
Alex **IWOBI**, *Everton*
Glen **KAMARA**, *Rangers*
Ainsley **MAITLAND-NILES**, *Roma (on loan from Arsenal)*
Donyell **MALEN**, *Borussia Dortmund*
Yunus **MUSAH**, *Valencia*
Reiss **NELSON**, *Feyenoord (on loan from Arsenal)*

Eddie **NKETIAH**, *Arsenal*

Bukayo **SAKA**, *Arsenal*
Emile **SMITH ROWE**, *Arsenal*
Wojciech **SZCZESNY**, *Juventus*
Carlos **VELA**, *Los Angeles FC*

Joe **WILLOCK**, *Newcastle United*

Nico **YENNARIS**, *Beijing Guoan*

There is an increased scrutiny on academies. The issue of player welfare and how clubs prepare their youngsters for life after football has never been in greater focus. It is admirable that Arsenal have a keen eye on rectifying the wrongs of youth football's past.

Ultimately, though, most outside observers' analysis of Mertesacker's work will centre on how many players graduate from the academy to contribute at first-team level, whether the pipeline that delivered Saka and Smith Rowe will continue to flow.

There is no greater developmental leap required of a footballer than the transition from elite youth prospect to first-team star. For some, like Saka, it happens swiftly. Others take a more convoluted route. Mertesacker recognises the need for adaptability, that development is neither linear nor uniform.

"I think Bukayo is a generational talent," he says. "That happens once in ten years. That's Cesc Fabregas. That's Jack Wilshere. And that's Bukayo Saka.

"However, we have a further responsibility to bridge that gap between Under-18s and Under-23s to the first team and the Premier League. That's a big gap. We're trying to incorporate a loan model where we expose our players to more senior football. They need that sometimes – Emile Smith Rowe went on loan to Leipzig abroad and to Huddersfield."

In addition to a keen focus on carefully plotted loan moves as a developmental tool, Mertesacker has made key coaching appointments in search of a more progressive approach, with highly-rated former England youth coach Kevin Betsy replacing Arsenal legend Steve Bould in charge of the Under-23s last season, for example. The scouting department has also been overhauled, with Lee Herron, the former Reading academy manager, appointed head of talent identification in place of another former Highbury hero, Steve Morrow.

Nothing, of course, is guaranteed when it comes to mapping the future of young footballers. But every aspect of the evolution the German has overseen at Hale End has been with a view to competing with Chelsea's Cobham academy to be considered London's finest and to provide the best possible platform for the club's kids to succeed.

"We're trying to put them in the best position," Mertesacker concludes. "If they're going to enter, we open the door widely at this football club."

eye witness

Lukas Vrablik reports

POLAND

Podolski's Polish homecoming

Lukas and Zofia...Podolski holds his World Cup medal with his grandmother
Instagram @lukaspodolski

In one of the most interesting transfers of 2021, former Germany international Lukas Podolski made his dream move to Poland. By joining Gornik Zabrze, one of the most successful clubs in Polish history, he fulfilled a promise that he made to his grandmother Zofia.

"I will play the last game of my career for Gornik," Podolski said after finalising the move in July.

Since then, Podolski's impact on the pitch has been limited, but it has meant a lot to Gornik and the rest of the Polish league. Podolski played 130 games for Germany and had a role in winning the 2014 World Cup, but he frequently mentions his Polish roots.

He was born in Gliwice, a few kilometres from Zabrze, in 1985, and his parents moved to West Germany two years later. He grew up there, but continued to visit his family in Silesia, a region in the south of Poland, where Gliwice and Zabrze are located.

On his later visits to grandmother Zofia, a long-time Gornik supporter, he promised her to play for the club at the end of his career. Sadly, she didn't have the chance to see it, as she died in 2019. Back then, Podolski posted a picture on Instagram, standing alongside his grandmother and holding a World Cup golden medal. "As a little boy, I played football with you. You made me who I am. You always believed in me and my dreams, and together we won the medal of world champions," he wrote in the caption.

Podolski's career has taken him to Cologne, Bayern Munich, Arsenal, Inter and Galatasaray, and later Vissel Kobe in Japan and Antalyaspor in Turkey. At the age of 36, he decided to sign at Gornik, turning down a lucrative offer from Mexican side Queretaro to do so.

This wasn't a typical transfer in Poland, where clubs usually buy cheaper players from the Balkans, Central Europe or South America, and never usually ones with Podolski's profile.

Tomasz Hajto, a former centre-back who won 62 caps for Poland and also played for Gornik, tells *World Soccer*: "From a marketing point of view, it was one super transfer for the Ekstraklasa [Poland's top flight]. He was a top player, had one of the best left foots when he was at his peak. And, it's also great for young players, because they see what they need to do in order to play big football."

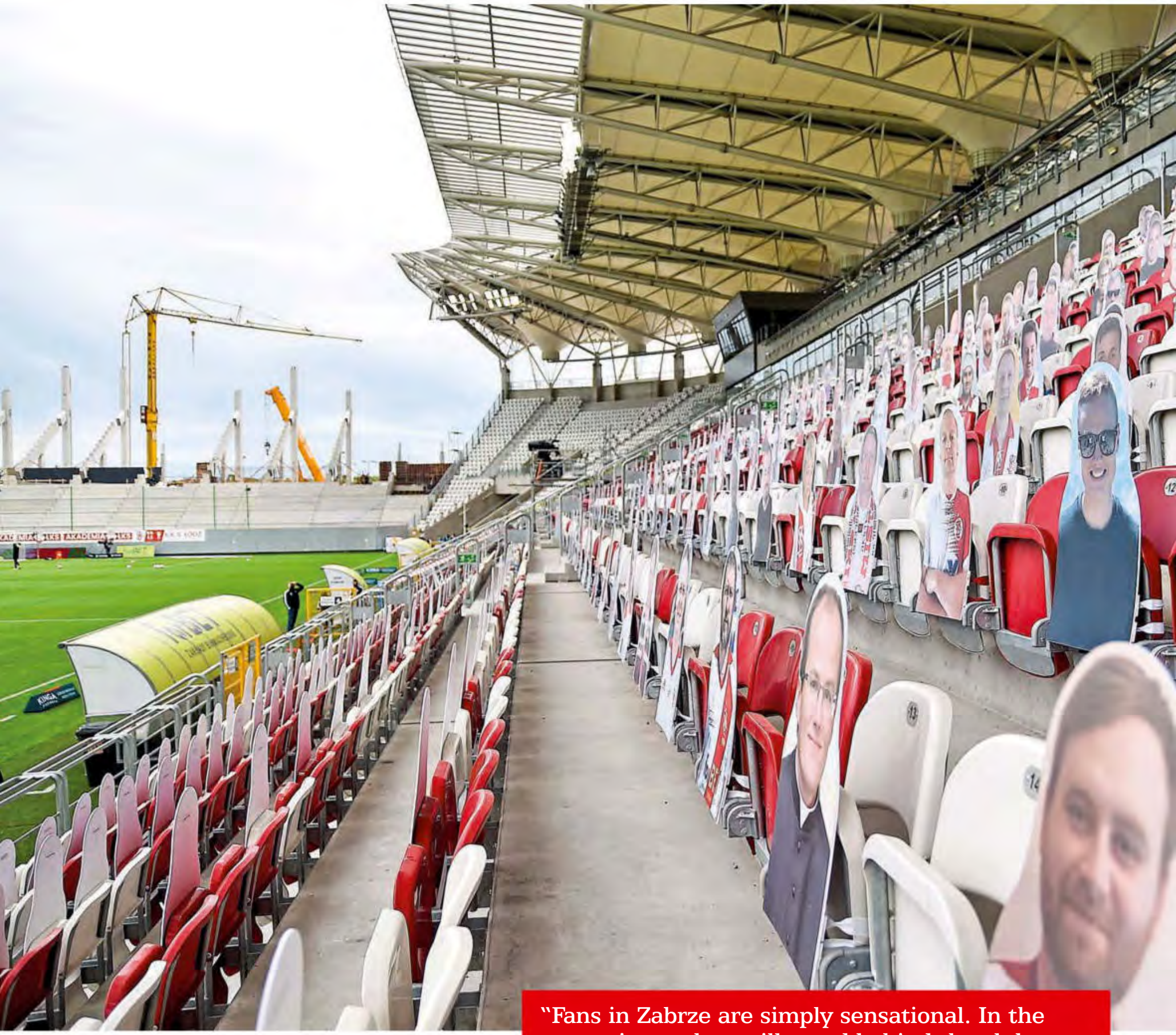
Maciej Kaliszuk, a journalist at newspaper *Przeglad Sportowy*, explains: "Gornik is a club with great history and many fans. It's the fourth or fifth most popular club in Poland, and the most popular one in Upper Silesia." It came as no surprise when around 10,000 fans turned up at the stadium to see Podolski introduced.

With 14 league wins, Gornik are one of the most successful clubs in the country. Only Legia Warsaw have won more, having lifted back-to-back titles in the last two years. They've had some turbulent times as well though, and haven't won the league since 1988.

Their "golden era" came in the 1960s and early '70s, as they won eight league titles in 12 years, including five in a row (1963-67). In 1970, they reached the European Cup Winners' Cup final, beating Olympiakos, Rangers and Levski Sofia en route to the semi-finals, which was decided by a coin toss after three draws with Roma.

In the final, they lost against the Manchester City team of Francis Lee and Colin Bell. Gornik's team, on the other hand, was built around long-time captain Stanislaw Oslizlo and legendary ▸

Homecoming... Podolski posing in Gornik Zabrze's kit
Instagram @lukaspodolski



> "Fans in Zabrze are simply sensational. In the worst times, they still stand behind the club. It is not like that in every club"
>
> **Tomasz Hajto, former Gornik Zabrze defender**

national team striker Wlodzimierz Lubanski.

"A lot of great players identify themselves with this club," says Hajto. "In the new stadium, for example, they have images of the legends Oslizlo and Lubanski in the stands. Lubanski made his debut as a 16-year-old and went on to became a world-class player, Real Madrid wanted him."

According to the club's former press officer, Jan "Bolek" Niesyto: "When you come to this club's offices, you have to take off your shoes, because the history is so big."

After the fall of communism, Gornik – the name means "miner", an expression of the region's mining industry – suffered economically, yet remained one of Polish football's powerhouses in the early 1990s. In 1993, Hajto joined a squad containing several players from the Polish side that were silver medallists at the 1992 Olympics, as well as members of the Under-21 national team. Together, they battled for the title.

"In the last round, we played at Legia Warsaw in a title decider," remembers Hajto. "We were winning 1-0 after the first half, meaning we would become champions. Then, the referee gave us three red cards, so we played with eight players. Legia then scored from the corner and won the league."

It is a game that has gone down in Polish football history as one of the biggest refereeing controversies of all time. If Gornik had won, perhaps they would have remained at the top table.

But they soon fell into further financial trouble – a frequent story among the clubs in the former eastern bloc. "The main sponsor and owner went away and Gornik had problems

Loyal support...Gornik fans continued supporting their club during the pandemic

"Super transfer"... Podolski in action in the Polish top flight

with money," says Hajto. "They had to sell players quickly, so Tomasz Waldoch and Henryk Baluszynski transferred to Bochum in Germany and Arkadiusz Kubik went to Belgium." In the 1997-98 season, Hajto signed for Duisburg. "The president told me: 'Tomasz, we have to sell you because we have no money.'"

After several years abroad, including spells in England at Southampton and Derby County, Hajto returned to Zabrze in 2007. It was a different time, with the club now owned by German insurance company Allianz. "Those were really great times, they had a plan for the new stadium and fans used to come. In the first friendly game in Zabrze, there were 7,000 fans," he remembers.

Gornik's fanbase is described as one of the most loyal in the country. Hajto says that when the team battled against relegation, they kept coming. "At the old stadium, 16,000 people supported us in the derby against Ruch Chorzow. That was sensational. We didn't play well at the time, but fans would still attend. Fans in Zabrze are simply sensational. In the worst times, they still stand behind the club. It is not like that in every club," he adds. As well as their 34-year wait for the title, Gornik have been relegated twice – in 2009 and 2016.

Now, back in the top flight and with work underway on the Arena Zabrze, it seems that a club with a rich past are taking steps in the right direction. Podolski's arrival has given hope to many fans. "Polish fans respected him more than for example Miroslav Klose," explains Kaliszuk, comparing Podolski to another Polish-born World Cup winner. "He was always nice and talked about his connections with Poland, but I wouldn't say that they loved him. He chose Germany.

"Gornik fans liked him very much, as he always underlined his commitment to this club."

Podolski didn't celebrate when he scored twice against Poland at Euro 2008, has a Polish wife and talks Polish with his kids.

It's been a slow start for Podolski, primarily due to a short summer break, injuries and coronavirus. After 17 games he had only scored four goals and, while only one player has scored more for Gornik, fans would certainly have hoped for more. Yet his wider impact has been undeniable.

"Podolski helped the club's marketing a lot, Gornik became a more respected brand," says Kaliszuk. "On the pitch, he was firstly disappointing, but started playing well in the last games of 2021. His impact on Ekstraklasa is quite limited, but he definitely did a lot for its PR. He makes the league more attractive."

Gornik hero... Tomasz Hajto

VINI VIDI, VICI

In 2021, Vinicius Junior graduated from exciting youngster to fully-fledged *Galactico*. We chart the Brazilian wonderkid's rise…

Words: Nick Bidwell

The timeline of a top-drawer performer invariably contains a Eureka moment, a juncture when a player announces himself as a head-turner with the brightest of futures. In explosive form for Real Madrid this campaign, young Brazilian left-winger Vinicius Junior, 21, experienced that turning-point feeling some five years ago while featuring for Rio giants Flamengo in the prestigious Copa Sao Paulo Under-20 tournament.

The "*Copinha*", a major event in the soccer-obsessed nation that is Brazil, has become a rite of passage for would-be superstars in this part of the world. Such big names as Rai, Rivaldo, Djalminha, Neymar, Lucas Moura and Gabriel Jesus have used the competition as a springboard to high office, and so it was with Vinicius at the 2017 edition.

Vinicius' numbers in that 2017 festival (four goals and five assists in seven appearances) tells its own spellbinding story. A threat anywhere along the front-line, Flamengo's wiry number 18 was sensational throughout, wriggling past any number of markers, lightning-quick, full of outrageous feints, shimmies and dummies, great at playing on the shoulder of the last defender, masterful in his set-piece delivery and brimming with energy, imagination and sharpness.

Many of his goals at the *Copinha* were highlight-reel material. Take his brilliant right-footed curler from the edge of the box against Central: a marvellous dipping effort that left the opposition keeper pawing at thin air. Or the off-the-cuff goal he netted versus Cruzeiro, diverting home a corner with an instinctive twist of his chest.

The Flamengo *Copinha* Class of 2017 ultimately failed in their bid to defend their title, knocked out at the quarter-final stage by Corinthians. Yet Vinicius' show-stopping displays made for a sumptuous consolation prize, a gift-wrapped package of panache, fire in the belly and end product. Not bad for a 16-year-old who was one of the youngest players in ▶

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the tournament and relatively new to Flamengo's Under-20 squad.

"Vinicius is a very talented player," declared Flamengo youth team coach Gilmar Popoca. "He has wonderful skills, he is dynamic, speedy and can dribble. That said, we are trying to shape him a little, to try to make sure that he doesn't over-complicate things in certain situations. He really is a decisive player."

For Brazilian football insiders, Vinicius was by no means an unknown quantity prior to the 2017 *Copinha*. He was voted Player of the Tournament at the South American Under-15 Championship in 2015, garnered lots of praise for his work with young Flamengo sides and already had his first professional contract in his pocket, a document he signed shortly after turning 16.

The 2017 *Copinha* essentially offered the kid from Sao Goncalo (a city in Rio de Janeiro state) a massive shot of credibility. Thanks to his brilliant ball-on-a-string performances, he had proved himself the real deal, someone for the national media to embrace and venerate. Considered the latest in a long line of Brazilian prodigies, he now was cast as the "new Neymar" or "new Robinho". The bar could not have been set higher.

Baby-faced...the winger in action during his early Flamengo days

Breakthrough...Vinicius Junior was Brazil's hottest young talent back in 2017

His next step up the career ladder came a few weeks later at the South American Under-17 Championship, where our hero yet again covered himself in glory. The competition, held in Chile, was to all intents and purposes the "Vinicius Show", the youngster contributing seven goals and two assists to Brazil's eventual triumph. The recipient of the two most important post-tournament awards, the MVP and Golden Boot, he also found the time for some of his party pieces, notably executing three "*Chapeus*" tricks (flicking the ball over a defender before immediately controlling it) in short order against Paraguay.

"In my opinion, he has everything to become a high-performance player, to represent the senior national team and play for big European clubs," opined Brazil Under-17 coach Carlos Amadeu. "If he remains focused on his goals, he has all the tools. He has great technical qualities and at the moment, is reacting with a cool head to the glamour that surrounds him. He has remained balanced and if he stays like that, he can reach the top. He has huge promise, but we really should not stir up so much fanfare. He's a good lad with a wise head on his shoulders.

"My hope is that all the people who are currently talking about him so much, will show patience when he inevitably begins making mistakes."

Returning to Brazil as the all-conquering hero, he was soon training on a regular basis with the Flamengo first-team squad. In May 2017 – still two months shy of his 17th birthday – he marked his pro debut with an eight-minute substitute cameo in a domestic league game versus Atletico Mineiro. Though he had precious little time to make an impact, it was a memorable baptism nonetheless. The youngster would have felt ten feet tall on hearing Flamengo supporters baying for his introduction and just to make the occasion even sweeter, he had the pleasure of being on the same pitch as his boyhood idol Robinho.

"He [Vinicius] was nervous, but that's a normal state of affairs," explained Flamengo boss Ze Ricardo after the game. "It's nice for him to have passed this milestone. However let's stay calm and let him enjoy the moment. He's young and he has a lot to give. When he settles in, he will show all his potential."

Ironic that while Ze Ricardo was striving to strike a cautious note, Flamengo were already preparing the ground to cash in on the teenager. The decision to raise his buy-out clause from €30 million to €46 million – via a new and improved contract inked by the youngster 72 hours after making his senior debut – was a sure sign of the direction of travel. Just a week later, Real Madrid announced that they had won the race for the 16-year-old's signature. All in all, Vinicius only had 17 minutes of first-team football under his belt.

Real, whose plan was to definitively acquire Vinicius on his 18th birthday in July 2018, originally were thought to have paid Flamengo the exact buy-out sum and not a penny more. However according to former agent, Josep Maria Minguella, the transaction cost a lot more, with Real having to stump up an additional €8m in agents' fees and another €8m to the player's family.

While Real toasted their transfer market good fortune, arch-rivals Barcelona could only bemoan their lot. Representatives of the Camp Nou outfit – and especially their South America recruitment consultant, Andre Cury – had assumed they had a deal in place to bring Vinicius to Catalonia. Unfortunately for the *Blaugrana*, their

Real Madrid announced that they had won the race for the 16-year-old's signature. All in all, Vinicius only had 17 minutes of first-team football under his belt

Wonderkid...Vinicius Junior collects his best player award for the South American U17 Championship

Timeline

AUG 2010
Joins Flamengo's academy at the age of ten, a year after being rejected by the club's futsal side for being too young.

DEC 6, 2015
Named Player of the Tournament after winning the South American U15 Championship, beating Uruguay on penalties in the final.

MAR 19, 2017
Collects the best player and top goalscorer awards after Brazil win the South American U17 Championship.

MAY 13, 2017
Makes his debut for Flamengo as an 82nd-minute substitute in a 1-1 draw with Atletico Mineiro in the league.

MAY 23, 2017
Signs an agreement to join Real Madrid just after his 18th birthday in the summer of 2018.

AUG 10, 2017
Scores the first professional goal of his career, just 30 seconds after coming off the bench, in Flamengo's 5-0 Copa Sudamericana win v Palestino.

Iconic image...Vinicius' now-famous sunglasses celebration

rivals in white had other ideas, as well as a markedly different playbook. When it comes to chasing talent, Real president Florentino Perez and his board never back off.

In his final 12 months on Flamengo's books, Vinicius continued to sparkle like a jewellers' display cabinet. In June 2017, he claimed his first Brazilian top-flight assist in a 2-0 home win over Ponte Preta and in August, broke his goalscoring duck, netting with a neat, right-footed finish in a 5-0 rousting of Chilean side Palestino in the Copa Sudamericana; his very first touch after coming on as second-half substitute.

BELOW: Welcome to Madrid...Vinicius Junior's unveiling at the Bernabeu

As 2017 slipped into 2018, he became more influential week on week, looking especially impressive in the group stage of the Copa Libertadores, South America's premier club competition. A superb brace in a 2-1 win at Ecuadorian side Emelec in March 2018 underlined both his unique potency on the counter-attack and the

JUL 20, 2018

Officially presented as a Real Madrid player at the Bernabeu, and is issued the No.28 shirt.

SEP 29, 2018

Comes on as an 87th-minute sub in a goalless draw with arch-rivals Atletico Madrid for his La Liga debut.

OCT 31, 2018

Starts for the first time in a *Los Blancos* shirt, collecting two assists in a 4-0 win over Melilla and earning the Man of the Match award from *Marca*.

NOV 3, 2018

Scores his first Real Madrid goal, ten minutes after coming on as a substitute, in a 2-0 win against Real Valladolid.

DEC 22, 2018

Comes off the bench to assist Real Madrid's final goal in their 4-1 victory over Al Ain in the final of the Club World Cup.

FEB 28, 2019

Called up to Brazil's senior team, but misses out on any game time due to an injury, and is subsequently overlooked for the 2019 Copa America.

threat he posed when shooting with his supposedly weaker left foot.

His first goal versus Emelec, cutting inside from the right flank, then dribbling past a couple of defenders before firing home, was significant in more ways than one. Not only was it one of the most thrilling individual goals in the whole of the 2018 Libertadores, it also made him Flamengo's youngest-ever marksman in the competition. Flamengo's very own lifesaver in this match, Vinicius celebrated his winning double by donning a pair of sunglasses that a fan had thrown onto the pitch. The photo of him posing in those shades, missing one lens, is now a cult image.

Real Madrid were not merely bowled over by Vinicius' technical prowess, extreme pace and agility. They were equally impressed by his attitude, humility and professionalism. When weighing up the pros and cons of a swoop for him, Real scouts apparently came to the conclusion that he was the "right sort" of Brazilian; that he had more in common with such dependable Real aces as Marcelo and Casemiro than the diva-like excesses of a Ronaldinho or a Robinho. This verdict obviously has passed the test of time.

Long before showing up at the Bernabeu, Vinicius was known for staying humble, for hiding his heavenly gifts behind a matter-of-fact veneer. Even when thrust into the limelight at the 2017 *Copinha*, he was at pains to play down his exploits. "No one would have imagined this [two goals on his *Copinha* debut]. But I was prepared for it. This is what I've been working towards."

Whether honing his skills as an infant at a Flamengo soccer school in his hometown of Sao Goncalo or playing schoolboy futsal (hard court indoor football) for the Canto do Rio club in Niteroi, the young Vinicius punctuated his approach to the game with two basic attributes: virtuosity and work ethic. A rare combination, which has stood him in tremendous stead.

"He really loved to play with the ball," recalled Cacau, his first coach at the Flamengo football school. "He had this boldness about him from the earliest of ages. He was expressive, cheerful and loose on the pitch. This set him apart.

"I remember one match when he

First goal...Vinicius' first strike came v Real Valladolid

> "He was playing for our Under-11s against the Under-13s. He made an incredible pass that won his side the game. At the end of the match, children started calling him Robinho and asking for his autograph"
>
> Cacau, Vinicius' first coach

MAR 6, 2019
Forced off in tears after tearing a ligament in the Champions League defeat to Ajax and is ruled out for the rest of the season.

SEP 10, 2019
Finally makes his senior international debut as a 72nd-minute substitute in Brazil's 1-0 defeat to Peru.

DEC 2, 2019
Comes fourth in the voting for the Kopa Trophy – presented to the world's best Under-21 player – at the 2019 Ballon d'Or awards.

DEC 11, 2019
Scores his first Champions League goal in a 3-1 group-stage win over Club Brugge in Belgium.

MAR 1, 2020
Nets his first *Clasico* goal, opening the scoring after cutting in off the left wing, as Real run out 2-0 winners versus Barcelona.

was playing for our Under-11s against the Under-13s. He made an incredible pass that won his side the game.

"At the end of the match, children watching started calling him Robinho and asking for his autograph. It was a very funny moment. I've seen many boys allow themselves to be led down other paths. Vinicius though, was very focused. He trained a lot and if it was up to him, he would have taken part in the sessions of every age group. He had so much hunger. We always felt that this was what made him different – the desire. Much of his success stems from it.

"We saw that he had the potential to be a pro footballer. However it's a long process, one that depends just as much on performances on the pitch, as factors off it. A good family structure is vital for any player and Vinicius had sensational support. His father was always close by, making sure that he stayed on the straight and narrow."

During his time at Real, he has had his share of difficulties, spending a large proportion of his first three seasons on the bench, rupturing knee ligaments in the spring of 2019 and receiving a great deal of criticism, particularly for his decision-making and tactical awareness. But seeking solace in his inner strength, he has spectacularly come out the other side. This season he has already hit double figures for league goals for the first time in his career, and Real cannot do without him these days.

With his club career in full bloom, he now must turn to filling in the one gaping hole in his CV – his lack of full national team recognition. Since making his senior debut for Brazil in a friendly versus Peru in September 2019, he has yet to establish himself as a vital part of the plans of head coach Tite.

The pressure from supporters and the media to incorporate the Real Madrid star is increasing for Tite, who has been in charge of *Selecao* since 2016. Yet he still seems to harbour doubts: "We have to be very careful with young players," he said recently. "Expectations are exaggerated and have to be calmed down. How many times has Vinicius been with us? In this process we have to take it gently. Young players do have their ups and downs."

In a World Cup year, Vinicius must hurry to stake that all-important claim. A mighty challenge indeed, but not at all beyond him.

Yet to convince... Vinicius made four appearances at the 2021 Copa America, all off the bench

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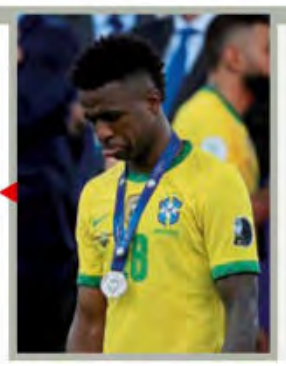
In form...only Karim Benzema scored more goals for Madrid in the first half of the La Liga season

JUL 16, 2020
Comes off the bench in Real's 2-1 victory over Villarreal, which seals the 2019-20 La Liga title.

APR 6, 2021
Scores twice in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals as Real knock out Liverpool 3-1 on aggregate.

JUN 9, 2021
Named in Brazil's 2021 Copa America squad, yet makes just four appearances and fails to start a game.

JUL 10, 2021
Comes on as a second-half substitute in Brazil's 1-0 defeat to Argentina in the final of the 2021 Copa America.



OCT 30, 2021
Scores twice as Real beat Elche 2-1 to go top of the table, taking his personal league tally to nine goals – his best ever return since moving to Spain.

DEC 10, 2021
Named La Liga Player of the Month for November.

Vinicius Junior

RELEASE CLAUSE

€1 billion

Expected release clause in Vinicius' next Real Madrid contract

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TOP DRIBBLERS

Player (club)	Dribbles
Vinicius Junior *(Real Madrid)*	**41**
Nicolas Moumi Ngamaleu *(Young Boys)*	34
Kylian Mbappe *(Paris Saint-Germain)*	32
Kingsley Coman *(Bayern Munich)*	31
Arnaut Danjuma *(Villarreal)*	25

REAL MADRID'S YOUNGEST COPA DEL REY GOALSCORERS

- May 1917 — **RENE PETIT** *v Arenas Club* — 17/7/7
- February 1995 — **RAUL** *v Valencia* — 17/7/13
- October 2012 — **JOSE RODRIGUEZ** *v CD Alcoyano* — 17/10/15
- December 2018 — **VINICIUS JUNIOR** *v UD Melilla* — 18/4/24

Years/Months/Days

BRAZIL

11

CAPS

GOALS

0

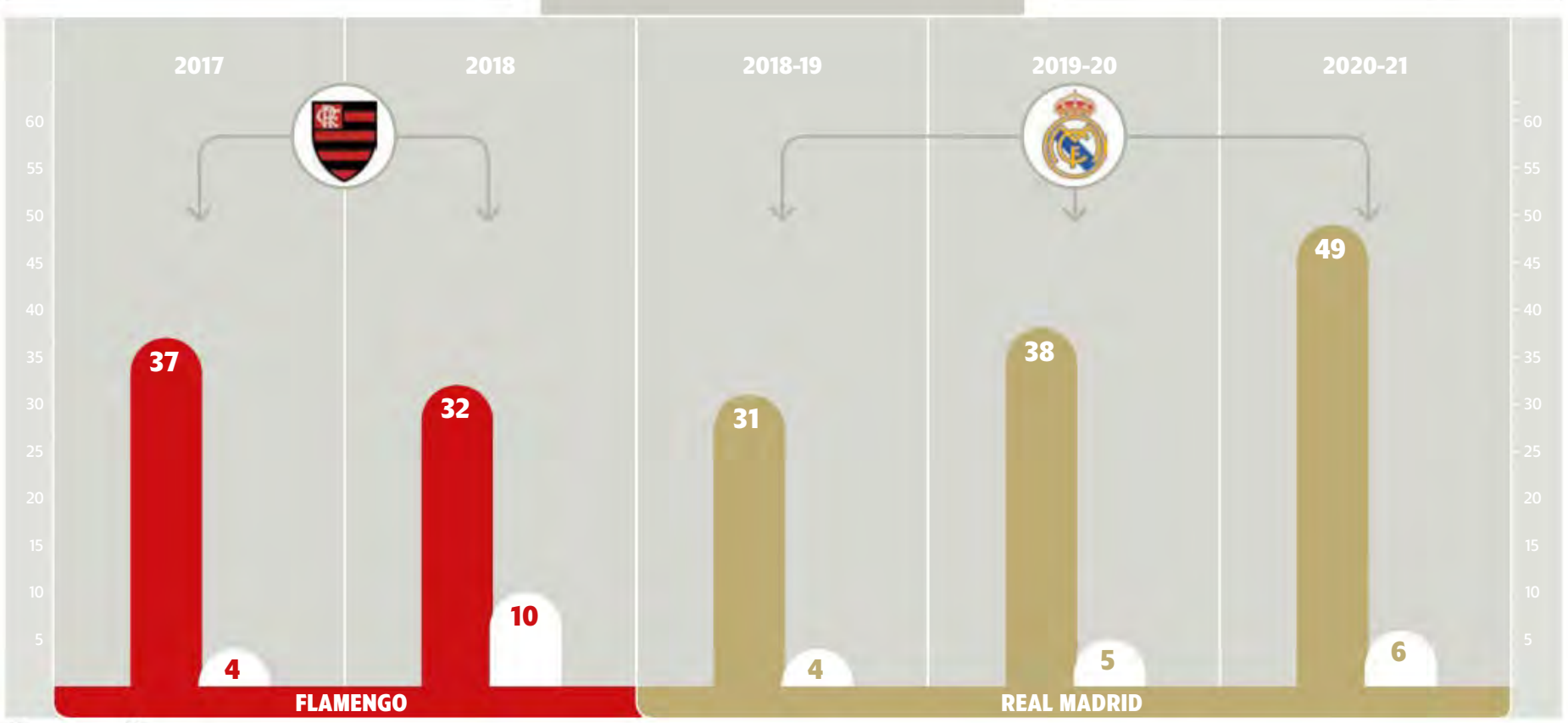
BRAZILIAN TOP FLIGHT RECORD SALES

£79.2m	**NEYMAR** 2013 *(Santos to Barcelona)*
£40.5m	**VINICIUS JUNIOR** 2018 *(Flamengo to Real Madrid)*
£36m	**LUCAS MOURA** 2013 *(Sao Paulo to PSG)*
£34.56m	**LUCAS PAQUETA** 2019 *(Flamengo to Milan)*
£28.8m	**GABRIEL JESUS** 2017 *(Palmeiras to Man City)*
£28.8m	**OSCAR** 2012 *(Internacional to Chelsea)*
£27.9m	**ARTHUR** 2018 *(Gremio to Barcelona)*
£27m	**REINIER** 2020 *(Flamengo to Real Madrid)*
£26.55m	**GABRIEL BARBOSA** 2016 *(Santos to Internazionale)*
£22.5m	**YURI ALBERTO** 2022 *(Internacional to Zenit)*

BRAZIL U17 STATS

19 CAPS

17 GOALS



GAMES GOALS *(Champions League dribbling stats prior to the knockout stages)*

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

Talentscout

[SAMBA STARLETS]

Words Tim Vickery

ENDRICK

Palmeiras

In a sentence
He's only 15, and he has already become a regular on the cover of the Spanish sports dailies.

What they say
"Yes, I see him with the potential to be the new *Fenomeno* [Ronaldo's nickname]. Endrick is 15. He's very strong and has incredible talent. But he's young and we need to see how he's going to develop as a professional"
Ronaldo

"The kid is complete – just give him a shirt and send him out to play! But we know that the mental side can be complicated. I was very happy when Abel [Ferreira, Palmeiras coach] didn't take him to the Club World Cup. It would have been too soon. He's so young – better to take it one step at a time."
Lulinha, one-time wonderkid who did not live up to the hype

The story so far
Endrick turned into an overnight global internet star early this year helping Palmeiras win the Sao Paulo Junior Cup, a huge, prestigious annual competition for players of 20 and under. A full five years younger than many of his opponents, he was the star attraction, scoring goals of different types, some of them of quite dazzling brilliance: the overhead kick from outside the box will live long in the memory.

The pressure was on – Palmeiras had never previously won this tournament, which is taken so seriously that there was fan violence in the semi-final, with Sao Paulo supporters invading the field and a knife thrown onto the pitch. But Endrick coped with everything with the same natural ease that got him selected for the competition in the first place, after showing that he was already too good for the Under-15 and Under-17 sides.

> "Yes, I see him with the potential to be the new *Fenomeno*"
> Brazil's World Cup-winning striker Ronaldo

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT ENDRICK

- Endrick first caught national attention after his father posted compilation videos of his goals on YouTube
- After joining Palmeiras at just 11 years old, he scored 165 goals in 169 games for the youth team
- He is contracted to the same agency as Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior and Arsenal forward Gabriel Martinelli

From Brasilia, he moved to Sao Paulo at the age of 11 when Palmeiras agreed to take a chance on him, their interest first sparked by internet clips – and the club made sure of keeping him when they fixed up his father with a job as a cleaner.

The next step
He could have been part of the squad for the Club World Cup, but head coach Abel Ferreira played down any speculation by saying that at his age Endrick would be better served by a trip to Disneyland.

For both the Brazilian league and the Copa Libertadores, he has to wait until he turns 16 in July to sign a full professional contract, be registered and then become available for selection. The next step, then, is to prepare for inclusion in the senior squad and battle to consolidate himself at this higher level.

It is already taken for granted that he will move to a European giant when he turns 18, in July 2024, and he has stated his affection for Real Madrid.

Strengths
It is the range of his talent that is so breath-taking. The Sao Paulo Junior Cup showcased a livewire left-footed striker of insane talent and awe-inspiring audacity. And some of the things that initially are not so eye-catching are also impressive. His movement into space is very mature, and the goal he scored in the final of the *Copinha*, stroked delicately home first time, was the unembellished strike of a natural finisher making the difficult look all too easy.

Weaknesses
The only obvious weakness at this stage of his embryonic career is his age. Endrick is entering an awkward transitional phase in any life, and he will have to do it in the public eye, surrounded by expectations and by economic interests. It is hardly surprising that many talented youngsters fall by the wayside. Football fans will be hoping that Endrick can deal with all the changes that life will be throwing at him.

DANILO

Palmeiras
The youngest player in last year's Copa Libertadores final, Danilo's progress since being release by Bahia has been remarkable. In 2020 he looked out of his depth, struggling with the defensive side of his duties, but last year established himself as one of the first names on the teamsheet. A dynamic left-sided midfielder who covers space, snaps into tackles and links up with the attack, he attracted interest from Arsenal in January, but there was no way Palmeiras would sell on the eve of the Club World Cup – where he was chosen as the third best player of the tournament. Come the summer, it will be a lot harder to hold onto him.

KAIKY

Santos
A local Santos lad who made his debut for the club early in 2021. The leading member of a new breed of classy Brazilian centre-backs who have grown up with Marquinhos as a role model. Won the Under-15 South American Championship in 2019 – alongside Matheus Franca, Savio and Angelo – and has been heavily linked with a move to Barcelona.

ANGELO

Santos
Extravagantly talented left-footed winger who usually operates cutting in from the right. The youngest goalscorer in the history of the Copa Libertadores – though end product and goalscoring need plenty of work. "Plays football as if he is dancing samba," said Ariel Holan, the highly-regarded Argentine who was briefly his coach.

MARCOS LEONARDO

Santos
Squat little striker with a touch of the young Romario about him. The financial problems of Santos have meant that responsibility has come early, especially since the sale of Kaio Jorge to Juventus, and Marcos Leonardo has been scoring senior goals from the age of 17.

LUIZ HENRIQUE

Fluminense
The latest product of the prolific Fluminense youth academy. Gained his first chance in the second half of 2020 after the pause for the pandemic, and had a highly promising 2021. Tall, well-built winger with the physical capacity to drop deep and help the defence, and poses an attacking threat with his booming left foot. Usually plays from the right wing.

BRUNO PRAXEDES

Red Bull Bragantino
Recently turned 20, the tall, elegant, versatile midfielder is shaping up as a left-footed version of former Argentina, Porto and Marseille midfielder Lucho Gonzalez. Had his career boosted by an Argentine coach, Eduardo Coudet, at Internacional, who somewhat surprisingly let him go to Red Bull Bragantino, where he is viewed as the maestro of the midfield.

MATHEUS FRANCA

Flamengo
Attacking midfielder, still only 17, who has been attracting European interest before his senior debut – and who has been placed on a long-term contract to protect his club's interests. Strong on the ball, two-footed and has sustained pace. Should be given first-team chances this year.

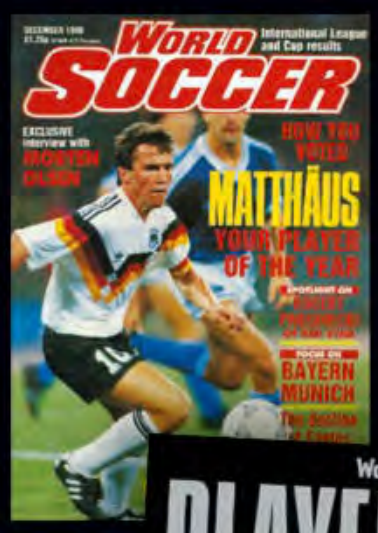
SAVIO

Instagram @Savinho.7

Atletico Mineiro
Lithe dribbling winger – yet another from the production line of talented left-footers who like to cut in from the right wing. Enjoyed first-team experience in last year's double-winning side, and can expect many more opportunities in 2022 – though the year got off to a bad start when he tested positive for COVID. Another to be linked with Arsenal, while City Football Group clubs Lommel and Troyes are said to be tracking him too.

WorldSoccer Presents

PLAYER OF THE YEAR



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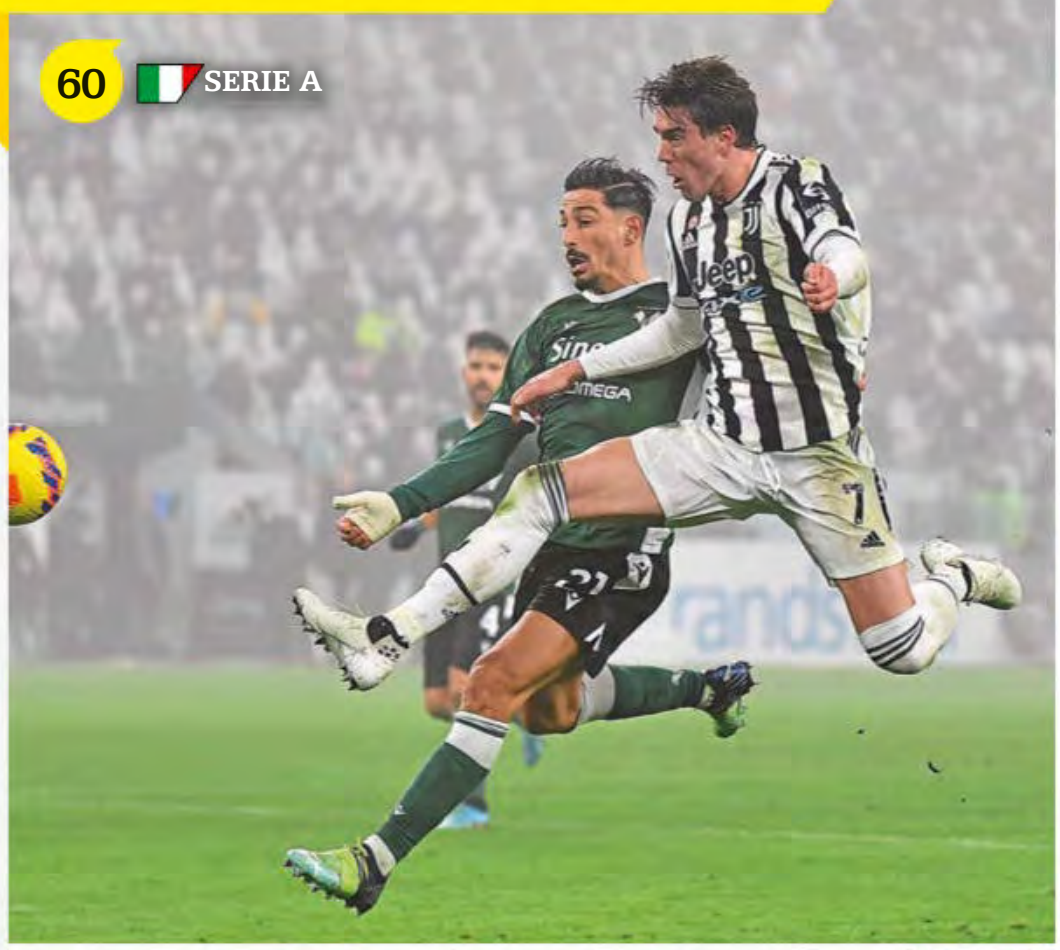
2021-22 SEASON UPDATE

As Europe's top five leagues approach the business end of the campaign, we pose the big questions and attempt to tackle the major talking points of the season so far



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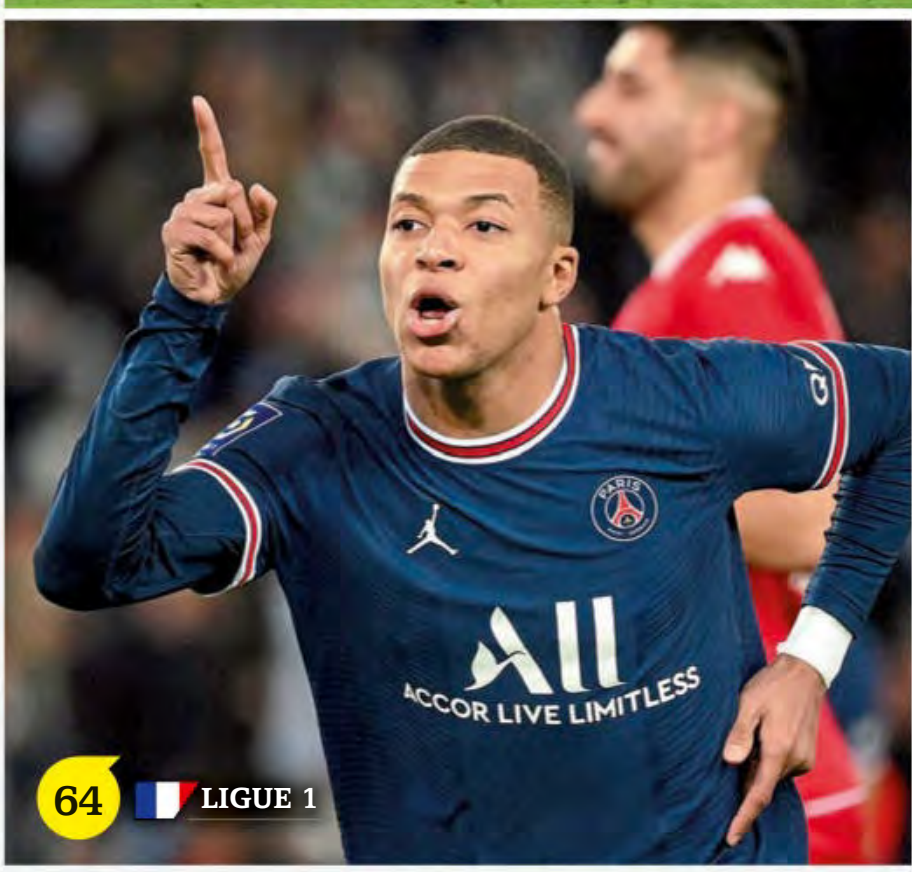
56 PREMIER LEAGUE

58 LA LIGA



64 LIGUE 1

62 BUNDESLIGA

Premier League update

Sad departure... Marcelo Bielsa

Were Leeds right to dismiss Marcelo Bielsa?

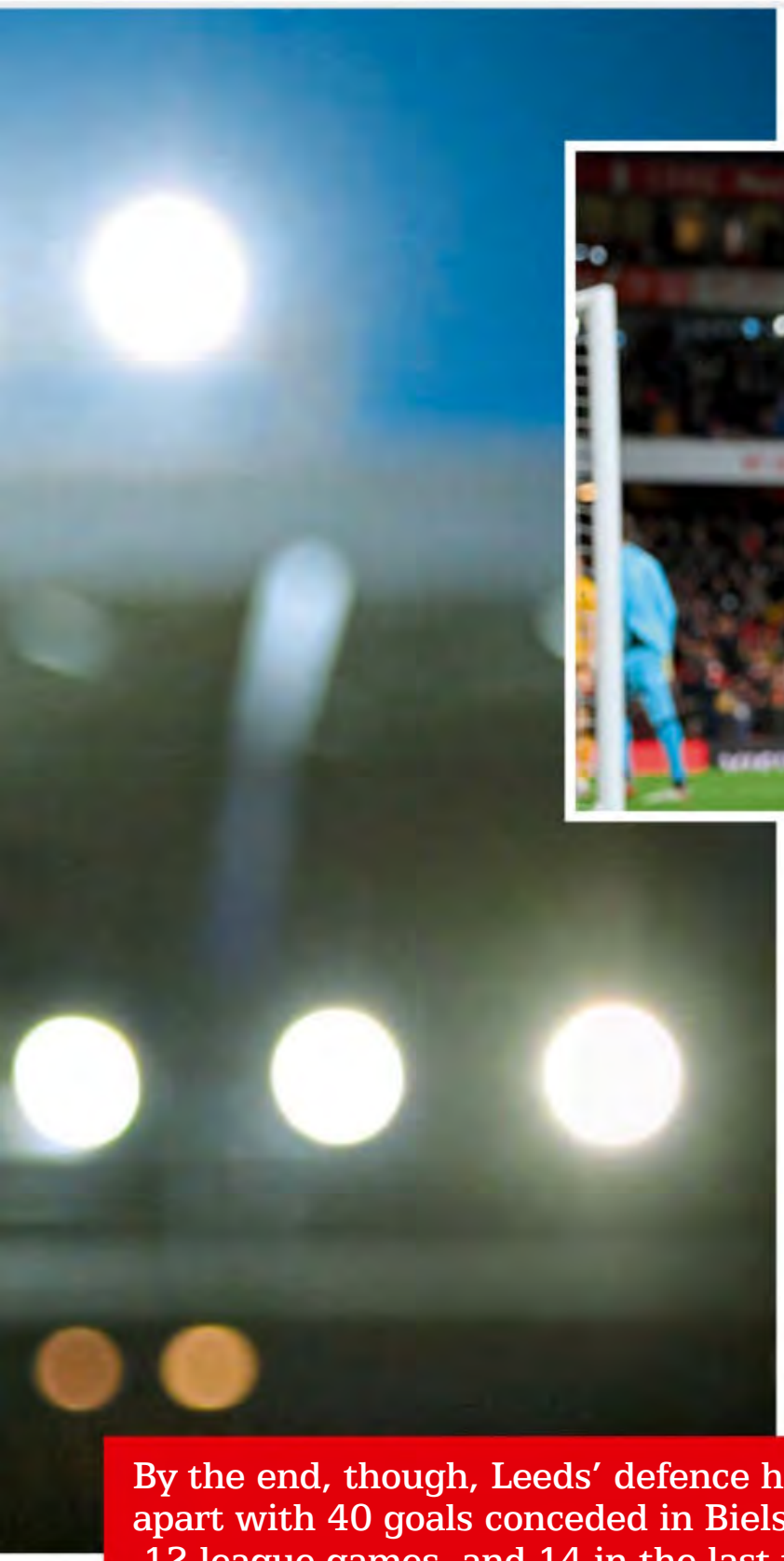
Unusually in the modern age, Bielsa's sacking came not amid acrimony but sadness. Over the first three years of his reign, he had elevated fairly ordinary players to produce a thrilling side that had taken Leeds back to the Premier League. By the end, though, the defence had fallen apart with 40 goals conceded in his final 12 league games, and 14 in the last three. There was criticism of his man-to-man pressing system, but that is how he has always played; it's unrealistic to expect him suddenly to change. More importantly, it was that approach that had brought his success, and made Leeds so good to watch. Bielsa's fundamentalism has always had its critics, but the fact is that if you have the second-lowest wage bill in the division and then lose a raft of players to injury, it's always going to be difficult.

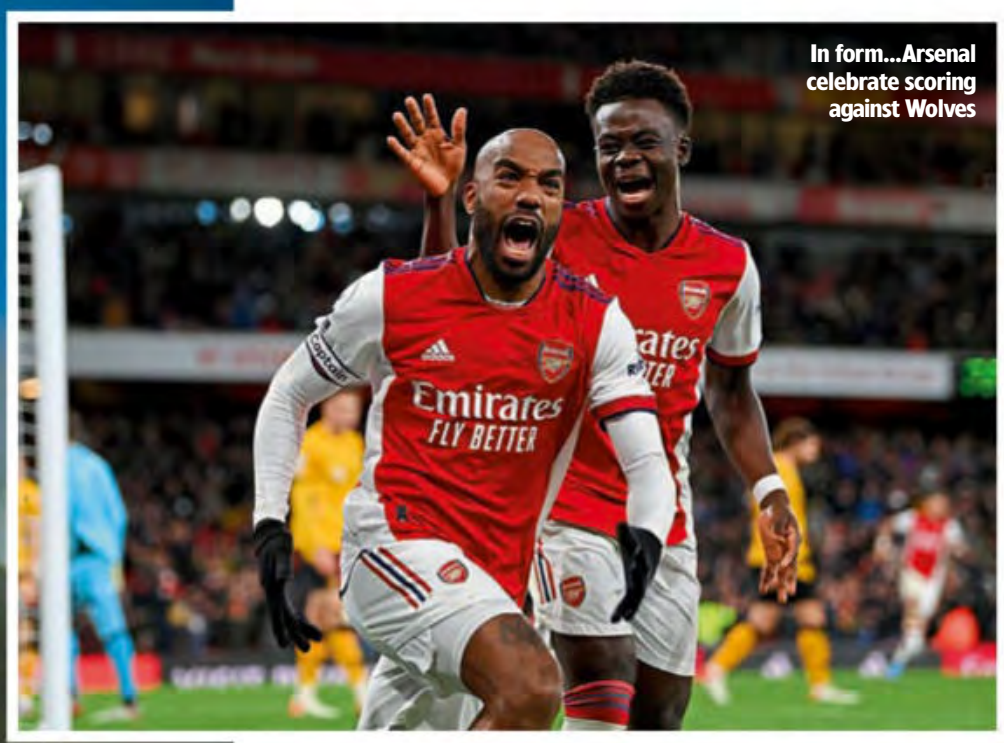
Perhaps Bielsa's approach has exacerbated the situation. He had never been at a club that long before. Perhaps the sustained intensity of his approach is in part responsible for the injuries, particularly given the recent compression of the calendar because of COVID. Perhaps opponents have begun to work out how to combat his philosophy. If he wasn't going to extend his contract beyond the summer, it may make sense to shake things up, to make the sacrifice to stop a slide that had seemed inexorable. But it is a gamble: it was Bielsa and his system that made Leeds what they were, and as some of those injured players return, a new manager may find it difficult to organise or motivate them in the same way.

On the up... Newcastle United

Will Newcastle United's January transfer window save them from relegation?

Based on squad alone, Newcastle should never really have been in serious relegation trouble: they had the 11th-highest wage bill in the Premier League even before the January signings. The new arrivals have had an impact – before he fractured his metatarsal, England international Kieran Trippier offered real authority at full-back added to a dangerous set-piece delivery, Dan Burn has added solidity, while Chris Wood is a necessary focal point in the absence of Callum Wilson – but just as significant is the sense of them marking a new beginning. The FA Cup defeat to Cambridge United was the absolute low, but it was when new signings began to be made that the





In form...Arsenal celebrate scoring against Wolves

By the end, though, Leeds' defence had fallen apart with 40 goals conceded in Bielsa's final 12 league games, and 14 in the last three

new era truly began. Concerns remain about the source of the money but relegation at least should not be a serious threat this season.

Who is best placed to finish fourth?
The situation remains volatile, but with Wolves losing to Arsenal and West Ham United in the space of four days, it now looks like a battle between four clubs. Manchester United probably have the best squad, but Ralf Rangnick is struggling to impose his vision and they have problems both in conceding soft goals and in taking chances. Arsenal have a youthful intensity and are in impressive form, especially at home, although questions remain about their capacity to get results against the best sides. Tottenham are as inconsistent as ever, but the Harry Kane-Son Heung-min partnership has begun to fire again, while West Ham continue to over-perform (although their wage bill is actually slightly higher than Tottenham's), but lack depth, particularly at centre-forward.

Is Frank Lampard the right fit as Everton manager?
In the short term, the most significant aspect of Lampard's appointment at Everton is that he is a manager the fans want – and it's been a long time since that has been the case. The atmosphere in the win over Leeds was noisy and supportive and, after years of Goodison as a grumblers' ground, with frustrated home fans always just one bad pass from an outbreak of booing, that is a clear positive.

Performances have been more mixed and essentially fall into two categories: good at home, including in the defeat to Manchester City, but poor away. Given that Lampard struggled at Chelsea to get the balance right between defence and attack, his team often looking vulnerable to the counter-attack, that must be a concern. But in truth the issues at Everton are only partially to do with the manager. A club of their stature, which is to say a tier below the very elite, can only really survive in the modern game by developing youth and selling it on at profit. Yet Everton have made a habit of buying players who have not quite made it elsewhere. Some bargains are to be had, but their squad is stuffed with high-earning players in the second half of their careers with next to no resale value and that is not a sustainable long-term strategy.

How do you explain Burnley's struggles this season?
After the draw with Crystal Palace, Burnley boss Sean Dyche made the point that the Clarets tend to come good in the second half of the season – which is, presumably, partly to do with how he structures their fitness work. They had been playing better than their results suggested before Christmas, but after their COVID-related break they seem to have renewed energy and, in Dutch No.9 Wout Weghorst, they have a dangerous centre-forward who is more mobile than Chris Wood. Survival suddenly looks very possible.

Popular appointment... Frank Lampard

Settled in... Burnley new boy Wout Weghorst

La Liga update

With Real Betis and Sevilla flying high in La Liga, is Seville the new capital city of Spanish football?
Simply put, Betis and Sevilla are very good – possibly better than ever before. The last time both teams won something in the same season was before the civil war – in 1935 Betis won the league and Sevilla the cup – but that could just happen again.

Madrid may dispute this: it is the only city to have provided both European Cup finalists, and has two sides still in the Champions League. But there's nowhere like Seville right now. Led by Julen Lopetegui, Sevilla are the only team that can realistically challenge Madrid for the title, while Manuel Pellegrini's Betis are playing the best football in the country and are in the cup semi-final, having beaten Sevilla en route.

Both are in the last 16 of the Europa League. The final of which is being played...in Seville. As is the Copa del Rey final.

So, yeah, Europe's hottest city may well be the capital city of football too.

Can anybody stop Real Madrid from winning the league title?
"*Hay Liga*" is the line they like to use in Spain. Literally it means: "There is league". Game on, in other words. But is there?

Not so very long ago, the answer looked like a pretty clear "no". In mid-December, it looked done. Real Madrid had just beaten last year's champions Atletico Madrid 2-0, their seventh win a row – a run that also included Sevilla, Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad – and were eight points clear of Sevilla, nine ahead of Betis, and 13 above Atletico. The team was settled, and no one could touch them.

"Is it over?" Carlo Ancelotti was asked, to which he replied: "We have to play six more months and I don't know what can happen next." What happened next was a 0-0 draw with Cadiz, the start of an eight-match run in which they failed to win back-to-back games.

In the meantime, they were knocked out of the cup and beaten by PSG in Europe, a previously unseen glimpse of vulnerability.

A chance had been handed to the rest. Sevilla went 11 games unbeaten, starting with a run of five wins in six. "Fans keep telling us: 'You have to catch Madrid'," Ivan Rakitic admitted.

Uncatchable? ...Real Madrid lead La Liga

Moving forwards... Real Betis and Sevilla

Trouble is, they didn't: the midfielder missed a late penalty against Osasuna, which would have taken Sevilla within a point of top, their third draw in a row.

So, is there league? There is, for now – but it's Madrid's to lose.

At 34, is Karim Benzema better now than he's ever been?
"He's the best striker in the world," Carlo Ancelotti said, which the Italian coach didn't say last time he was at the Bernabeu.

It is not true – as much as Benzema suggests so – that it's all about people taking too long to appreciate what he does. There has been a shift, serving others and scoring now. "Calling him a forward falls short," the Madrid coach insisted. "He's very complete, more complete than five years ago." In part that may be because he is now allowed to be, or because he has to be. Taking on responsibility and in a central position, he is just better than anyone else.

Form of his life... Karim Benzema

Surprise package... Rayo Vallecano

Is Rayo Vallecano's story the fairy tale of the season?
Yes, but there's a plot twist at the end of the story, and possibly no happy ending.

> Is there league? There is, for now – but it's Real Madrid's to lose

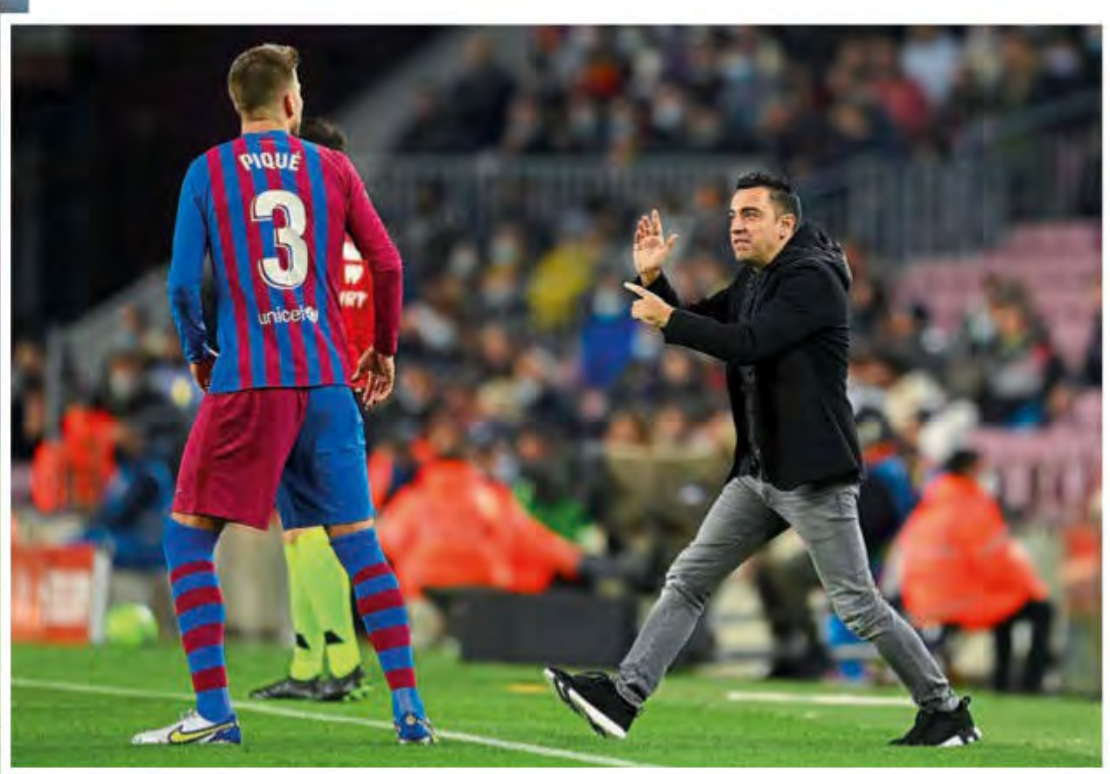
For the first half of the campaign, Rayo's home record was not just the best in La Liga, but in the whole of Europe. Winning every week and scoring loads of goals, a wild, unleashed team where players went at opponents from everywhere, there was no place in Spain more fun to watch football. They got to the edge of a Champions League place and into the cup semi-final.

Which was a miracle, because this is a club in crisis that has no money, a stadium that's crumbling, and where the supporters and the president are at war over far too many issues to be able to list here.

All that is catching up with them: home defeats did eventually arrive, including in the cup semi-final, and it all looks in danger of coming apart.

How is life under Xavi going for Barcelona?
"I see things that make me think we can do big things," Xavi said after Barcelona had scored four in Naples, and he wasn't alone. This wasn't an ideal time to take over and it hasn't been an easy start – the manager admitted he was surprised at some of the simple things his players couldn't do – but it's starting to fall into place.

They were laughed at for taking comfort from a *Clasico* defeat because they had played well, but it turns out they were right: something has shifted and results followed. A nine-game unbeaten run took them into the top four, and president Joan Laporta says they'll try to fight for the league. It may be too late for that, but it's not too late for a little optimism to be allowed back in.



Nou Camp coach...Xavi instructs his old team-mate Gerard Pique

Serie A update

Conte replacement... Simone Inzaghi

Have Internazionale got even better since Simone Inzaghi replaced Antonio Conte?

For much of the year, Inter have led the title race, looking as if they were going to pull off the unlikely feat of winning a second successive title with a squad which had lost coach Antonio Conte, plus key players like Romelu Lukaku, Achraf Hakimi and Christian Eriksen. Thus far, coach Simone Inzaghi and former Roma striker Edin Dzeko have done a more than reasonable job of replacing Conte and Lukaku. However, at the time of writing, an Inter title win is far from a done job.

Following a 3-1 defeat to Lazio in October, Inter set off on an impressive 14-match unbeaten run (including only three draws) which, however, crashed to an unexpected halt in February when they were beaten 2-1 by city cousins Milan in a derby that they had dominated for 70 minutes.

If they regain the vim and vigour of that 14-match run, then all is well and Inter will win the title, largely because they have the strongest squad in Italy.

How many horses are in the race for the *Scudetto*?

After a decade of Juventus dominance (nine titles out of ten), this year's title race was still wide open after two thirds of the season. At least four clubs, namely Inter, Napoli, Milan and Juventus could still win it.

Defending champions Inter remain favourites, given the overall quality of their dominant performances. However, two draws (Napoli and Genoa) and two defeats (Liverpool and Sassuolo) in late February introduced a serious note of uncertainty, making them look a tired side, and seeing them knocked off the top of the table.

Can Milan step in to lift the title instead? A 2-1 win in the Milan derby at the start of February – decided by two goals from Frenchman Olivier Giroud – certainly was a monstrous morale boost. Yet late February draws with Udinese and Salernitana suggested that, like Inter, they were running out of puff. Then too, despite a brilliant coaching job by Stefano Pioli, it remains hard to envisage a side led by "Golden Oldies" Zlatan Ibrahimovic (when injury free) and Giroud going all the way.

Whichever of the Milan club coaches, Pioli or Inzaghi, can inspire a mind-body revival from their exhausted troops will have the best chance.

Derby delight... Olivier Giroud celebrates scoring against Inter

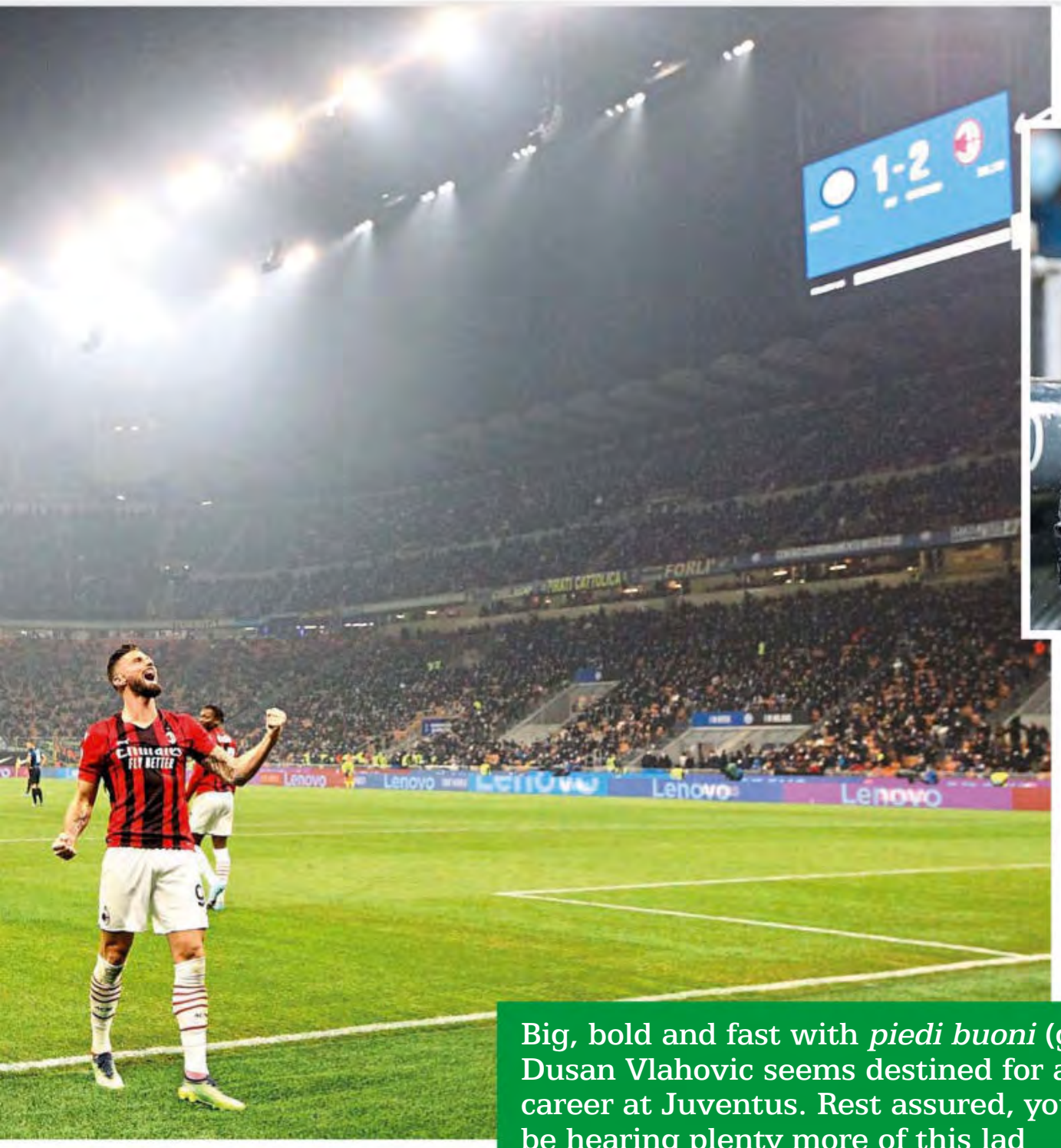
Which leaves us with the intriguing question of whether, 32 years after the Maradona era, Napoli can win their third title. At the end of February, they clashed with Lazio at the Stadio Olympico in what may prove to be one of the key encounters of the season.

In a game of fluctuating fortunes, Napoli pulled off a spectacular 94th-minute winner (from Spaniard Fabian Ruiz) to go joint top of the table with Milan. Can coach Luciano Spalletti ride out the tsunami tide of Neapolitan enthusiasm that will grip Naples between now and the end of the season?

Off the mark... Vlahovic scores his first Serie A goal for Juventus

Just how good is Juventus new boy Dusan Vlahovic?

Juventus are going through



Back in Italy...Jose Mourinho

Big, bold and fast with *piedi buoni* (good feet), Dusan Vlahovic seems destined for a glorious career at Juventus. Rest assured, you will be hearing plenty more of this lad

something of a revival, having started off the pace. The Old Lady spelt out their intentions loud and clear by making by far the most significant purchase of the January transfer window, namely Dusan Vlahovic from Fiorentina for €75 million.

The 22-year-old Serb, arguably the most potent striker in Serie A this season, soon underlined his match-winning quality by scoring on both his club debut (a 2-0 win against Verona) and on his Champions League debut (a 1-1 away draw to Spaniards Villarreal). Big, bold and fast with *piedi buoni* (good feet), Vlahovic seems destined for a glorious career at Juventus.

Rest assured, you will be hearing plenty more of this lad.

Is Jose Mourinho following his usual routine at Roma, or has he changed?

When Roma attacker Nicolo Zaniolo controversially had a 90th-minute goal disallowed at the end of a 0-0 home draw with Genoa in early February, the player lost his cool, protesting so vigorously to referee Rosario Abisso that he got sent off.

His coach, Jose Mourinho, commented on the incident to the media: "Well, the lad only said three times to the referee: 'What the f*** did you blow that for?'...I mean, if it had been Chiellini at the Juventus Stadium or Ibrahimovic at the San Siro, would they have been sent off?"

Mourinho has doubtless changed many of his methods over the years but there is one thing he still does very well. Namely, defending his club and his players.

Impressive...Roma striker Tammy Abraham

Which of Serie A's English imports have been the most impressive?

Of the seven English footballers currently playing in Serie A, there is little doubt that the man to have made the biggest splash this season has been former Chelsea striker, Tammy Abraham. Nineteen goals in all competitions by the start of March tells the tale of a talented player whose skill, allied to his work ethic, have seen some suggest that Gareth Southgate should call him up for the Qatar World Cup.

For a country not generally respected in Italy for the quality of its defenders, two players currently buck that trend, having both established themselves as automatic first-choice players in central defence - namely the Canadian-born Fikayo Tomori, now with Milan, and former Manchester United star, Chris Smalling at Roma.

As for the rest – Ainsley Maitland-Niles, also at Roma (on loan from Arsenal), Ronaldo Vieira at Sampdoria, Axel Tuanzebe at Napoli and Luis Binks at Bologna – the jury is still out, given how little they have played.

Bundesliga update

How does Julian Nagelsmann's Bayern compare to Hansi Flick's treble-winning side of 2019-20?
Bayern president Herbert Hainer has gone on record to claim that the current Allianz-Arena XI are more attractive to watch than Hansi Flick's all-conquering ensemble and many would agree with him. Boasting an attack of all the talents – leader Robert Lewandowski is backed up by the likes of Thomas Muller, Serge Gnabry, Kingsley Coman and Leroy Sane – the Class of 2021-22 arguably has an extra coating of adventure, panache and positional flexibility.

Flick's team was arguably better balanced though, more pragmatic and less vulnerable to pacy counter-attacks. Under Julian Nagelsmann, Bayern have tended to play a gung-ho type of game, using an extremely high defensive line and having seven or eight players raiding in advanced areas at any one time. This all-or-nothing philosophy does not come without its risks. See Bayern's 4-2 loss at newly-promoted Bochum in February, when they continually left the back-door ajar, conceding three goals in six minutes.

Why have RB Leipzig suddenly rediscovered their mojo since replacing coach Jesse Marsch with Domenico Tedesco?
Ex-Schalke and Spartak Moscow boss Tedesco, one of the sharpest football brains in Germany, has improved the Leipziger in virtually every area. They press more aggressively and purposefully; the switch from man-to-man to zonal marking has reaped immediate dividends; and from top to bottom, the Saxons have a much more organised and structured look to them. RB were often overrun in the first half of the season; that is no longer is the case.

Changes to the side's attacking methodology have come up trumps as well. Instead of Marsch's straight for the jugular approach, RB are now showing considerably more care and variety in possession, with both their support play and ball-circulation much improved. Encouraging the front three (Andre Silva, Christopher Nkunku and Dominik Szoboszlai) to frequently interchange also has worked wonders in creating openings in the red zone.

Gung-ho...Bayern boss Nagelsmann

Turnaround... RB Leipzig are back in form

Surprise package... Hoffenheim celebrate a victory over Wolfsburg

Have Borussia Dortmund pulled off a masterstroke in persuading Bayern stopper Niklas Sule to join them next season on a free transfer?
Bearing in mind that a porous back-line has been Dortmund's Achilles heel for quite some time, the arrival of the man-mountain German international has to be good news for the Dortmunder. Their prowess as an attacking force is often negated by defensive slip-ups, and Sule will add much-needed physical presence, watchfulness and leadership ability. Now 26, Sule is arguably in his prime as a footballer and should very much benefit from swapping a rather unappreciated auxiliary role at Bayern for main man status at the Westfalenstadion.

Equally important for Dortmund, the swoop for Sule represents a major psychological boost. So accustomed to seeing their best players jump ship for Bayern, the Black and Yellows can only be delighted to have given their arch-rivals a taste of their own medicine. A highly significant statement of intent.

> New RB Leipzig coach Domenico Tedesco, one of the sharpest football brains in Germany, has improved the Leipziger in virtually every area

Dortmund-bound... Sule

Which of the lesser lights appears the best equipped to achieve a top-four spot?
Hoffenheim, expertly led by young coach Sebastian Hoeness, have relied on a steely mentality to set up camp in the upper reaches of the table. It's no coincidence that almost half of their impressive points tally has come in games when they have come from behind to secure a result. The south-westerners play enterprising attacking football, with everyone expected to do his share in offensive mode. The proof? The 16 different names on the score-sheet by the end of February.

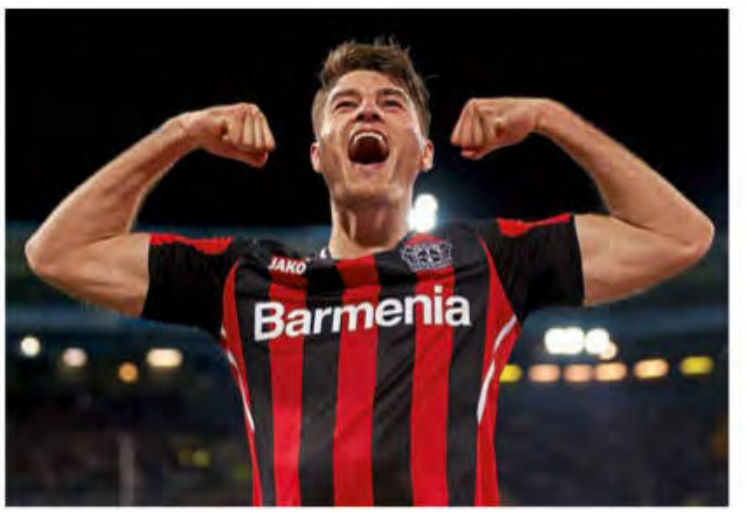
Hoeness, the son of former Bayern and Germany striker Dieter and nephew of Uli, merits a medal for this against-the-odds success story. Hoffenheim have made no major signings in the last two years and throughout the current campaign have been bedevilled by injuries.

Freiburg, who for the first time in their history went into the winter break in a top-four slot, continue to over-achieve. Coach Christian Streich, at the helm for a decade, has pieced together an outstanding collective unit worth much more than the sum of its parts. Defensively they are outstanding, with Dutch keeper Mark Flekken among the best custodians in the country.

Does prolific Leverkusen striker Patrik Schick belong in the same world-class category as a Robert Lewandowski and Erling Haaland?
On the evidence of this season, the 26-year-old Czech front-man fully warrants such an elite classification. He's been racking up the goals at a prodigious rate – 20 in 20 Bundesliga starts up until late February – and week in week out has proven himself to be the complete centre-forward package: great in the air, tough, pacy, hard-working, lethal in his left-footed finishing and able to hold the ball up.

In the goalscoring form of his life, Schick, 26, owes much of his performance explosion to greater maturity and a beefed up frame. Leverkusen coach Gerardo Seoane has played his part too, making sure that Schick never is left isolated and giving him lots of freedom to improvise and roam.

What a shame that he recently tore a calf muscle, an injury that might compromise Leverkusen's hopes of Champions League qualification.



Bulked up... Leverkusen's Patrik Schick

Ligue 1 update

Pitch invasion... fan trouble has been a persistent problem in France

How has Ligue 1 been handling widespread fan unrest this season?
Although fan unrest has abated to some extent in recent weeks, both Nice and Lyon were deducted points after projectiles struck and floored Dimitri Payet, resulting in both clubs' games against Marseille being abandoned. The incident at Nice even resulted in a mass brawl between the players, fans and coaches. Nearly half the league's clubs have been punished for some form of fan violence since.

One of the more shocking incidents involved a major confrontation between Lyon and second-tier Paris FC fans during their French Cup tie back in December. Both sides were eventually removed from the competition while a handful of PSG ultras were also sanctioned for their role in the disturbances at Stade Charlety.

It remains to be seen if bans, points deductions and stadium closures will have an effect. Longer-term, a change in fan culture is needed.

How far can Jorge Sampaoli take Marseille?
As Marseille's 20th coach this century, Sampaoli's position has always felt precarious. A vociferous fanbase, who violently stormed the training centre last term, can be more of a hindrance than a help while perpetuating impossibly high expectations. Sampaoli's constantly evolving and often gung-ho system provides a heightened sense of unpredictability.

However, over a year in, Sampaoli remains afloat. Despite an attacking set-up on paper, Marseille have one of France's best defences and are a dominant and aggressive proposition at their best, with a rejuvenated Dimitri Payet conducting. Champions League football is likely. Even so, struggling with too many draws, Sampaoli is still barely exceeding expectations and Marseille may be unable to keep up should Nice, Rennes and Lyon break away from the pack next season.

Is there any chance of Kylian Mbappe staying at Paris Saint-Germain, and how will the Parisians rebuild their attack without him?
Unlike his club, who are fearful of losing a €180 million signing close to becoming the best player in the world for free, Kylian Mbappe has remained calm over his rapidly expiring contract, repeatedly stating he's yet to decide between staying put and moving to Real Madrid to fulfil a childhood dream. His exit had seemed close to certain having asked to leave last summer but PSG's chances have been revived amid talk of a new short-term deal with the player's stance seemingly softening.

Nevertheless, it's still likely PSG start next season without Mbappe – an embarrassment for the club. A big statement would need to be

Flying high... Marseille

made via his replacement. Robert Lewandowski has supposedly been considered but, with the lack of youth a real concern, reports that Erling Haaland is now the club's prime target make more sense. However, with competition fierce, convincing Haaland to sign won't be easy.

Which other Ligue 1 talents will be the subject of transfer interest this summer?

Ligue 1 has often been the transfer window's epicentre, and summer 2022 should be no different. Equal parts creator, enforcer and dynamo, Monaco's 22-year-old France international Aurelien Tchouameni, Ligue 1's best midfielder not called Verratti, will be a target for many of Europe's elite.

Both of the Lille pair, striker Jonathan David and centre-back Sven Botman, plan to leave France at the end of the season but the champions will be looking for a combined fee approaching €100m. The Premier League and both Milan clubs will lead the chase.

Having enjoyed a specular renaissance in France after struggling at Milan, Lyon reportedly rejected a €60m offer from an English club for midfielder Lucas Paqueta in January. With PSG supposedly keen too, a bidding war could develop for the 24-year-old Brazilian international.

Graceful midfielder Houssem Aouar is also expected to leave OL this summer, although finding the right buyer might be as tricky as it proved last year.

With no option to buy in his Marseille loan deal and his contract up in 2024, Arsenal may finally make a decision on centre-back William Saliba's future. Largely impressive at the Stade Velodrome, there will be a series of high-profile takers should Arsenal decide to sell the 20-year-old.

Madrid-bound?... Mbappe scores past his potential future employers

> 22-year-old France international Aurelien Tchouameni, Ligue 1's best midfielder not called Verratti, will be a target for many of Europe's elite

Who is Ligue 1's most exciting team?

Few French teams have embodied the notion of Champagne football like Bruno Genesio's Rennes. Currently running their own team goal of the season competition, Rennes' verve and fluidity make for Ligue 1's leading attraction.

Orchestrator-in-chief, Croatian Lovro Majer – who both plays and looks like Luka Modric – effortlessly drifts around midfield picking teams apart with some deft passing and sharp interplay. Adding similar swagger from midfielder Flavien Tait and versatile forward Martin Terrier, plus the David Beckham-esque deliveries of Benjamin Bourigeaud can make for an elusive, occasionally unplayable, prospect. Lyon were obliterated 4-1 before Saint-Etienne and Bordeaux were routed 5-0 and 6-0 respectively.

Versatility is Rennes' main treat, however. Majer can play as a No.10 or a deep-lying playmaker, strikers Gaetan Laborde and Serhou Guirassy add physicality and goalscoring nous, while teenage wingers Jeremy Doku and Kamaldeen Sulemana add pace, skill and unpredictability. Should they find more consistency, next season might be Rennes' year – assuming Genesio can keep his squad together.

Transfer target...Aurelien Tchouameni

Midfield maestro... Lovro Majer

THOMAS HABERLI

"We want to stay in League C"

Estonia coach Thomas Haberli talks to *World Soccer* about his side's two-legged Nations League relegation play-out against Cyprus. The winner retains their place in the third tier, while the loser will drop down to Group D

How important is it to win the play-off tie?
Of course, it is an important game. It's the consequence from 2020 that we didn't win any of our Nations League games and so we maybe don't deserve to be in League C. We have to find our value, how strong we are, and these two games should show that. I think that over the last year we've shown good improvement, but we will see. But, of course, we want to stay in League C.

Do you feel that it will be a major drop in the competitive standard if you do go down and have to play in the same group as Malta and San Marino? Or is it a chance to build confidence with good wins?
You can say that both of those perspectives are right. For me, the top 20 ranked teams are really at another level – it's so difficult to win. But performance wise, our ambition is the improvement of the team and we want to play against attractive opponents and that's our ambition.

The Nations League has become very popular with coaches because of the concept of like versus like. Do you agree?
Yes, because the World Cup qualifiers were really tough, playing twice against Belgium, Wales and the Czechs. But when you have opponents who are of a similar standard, we can really improve not only our defending but also playing with the ball. To have a chance to win a game is a positive, especially for nations near the bottom of the rankings.

Belgium coach Roberto Martinez was very complimentary of your side during the World Cup qualifiers. Were you happy with how the team performed?
Our start was really, really bad because of the coronavirus situation. We had targeted points from Belarus and the Czech Republic in our opening matches but we gave away both games.

Then in June we started really well after winning the Baltic Cup and our performance in the autumn continued to improve. I was happy, although we probably shouldn't have lost at home against Wales. But we have to accept in some moments that a really top performance does not always guarantee success. But the point in Wales was fantastic because that hurt the Welsh a lot. They absolutely wanted to win the game.

From a personal perspective, when you take on a job like Estonia, you know it's going to be difficult. How do you reconcile taking a national team job and wanting to achieve something, but knowing there's limited opportunity?
Yes, you're right. For me it was clear that in a country with a population of 1.3 million, we'll find 20 players at a high level. I knew that I had to do a good job to collect the right players to put together a competitive team. The most important thing is to ensure we are working together and that everybody enjoys coming to the national team. It's a difficult challenge but one that I was looking forward to.

I want to show with this team that we can do better than in the past. My immediate goal is to improve the performances, as well as seeing that the players get more game time at their clubs. I was not satisfied that a lot of players are not playing regularly. We have to find a way that they find clubs where they can play so they will be in better shape when they come to the national team.

But that's not really within your capabilities, to give the players more regular club football. So how do you achieve this – encourage the players to go somewhere else?
In the end, I suppose I can only speak with the players and try to find out why they are doing better at national team level than at their clubs. It's not every player but some have to find a way to play more regularly. But we had some good moves for some of our players in the transfer period before the start of this season.

I need good players on the national team that are in good form, feeling confident and highly motivated to come to the national team to perform. The most important thing is we need good energy around the camp.

Is there exciting talent coming through the youth national teams in Estonia?

We have good players and the federation is doing a really good job. First they try to ensure there are regular games for the junior teams but we do not have the depth yet, so teams like our Under-19s find it tough. What is important is that we have in each age group one top player. At the moment we have [Karl] Hein and [Maksim] Paskotsi, who are really strong young players that play abroad, close to the first team at Arsenal and Tottenham. That helps a lot as they are role models for the others.

Latvia qualified for the European Championship in 2004 when the tournament comprised only 16 teams and that set a benchmark for the Baltic region. Can you see a situation where Estonia could do something special like that?
Of course we need to dream, we need no limitations in the ambitions and that was one of the most important things I first spoke to the team about. Latvia showed that you don't need 50 or 100 top players to do well. If you pull together, you can go far and we've made big strides of our own. We showed performance-wise last year that we can do better and now it's up to us to be more competitive. A lot is possible, we have ambition, the players have ambition and we want to grow.

How do you find coaching a national team versus club coaching, missing out on the day-to-day work and only getting the players six or seven times a year?
I think that's the only thing I'm missing a little bit. But this job, I'm a little bit sport director and coach, so that's good. But, of course, the daily work...I do miss that a little bit.

How does a Swiss coach end up in Estonia?
I had done some consulting work two years before, so I knew the situation in Estonia a bit and had forged some relations. The timing was fantastic. Estonia is fantastic. I wanted to try something new, I could see a vision on the part of the football association and my family and I decided, "yes, let's make the step." Now we get to see the sea – in Switzerland, it's just mountains!

And what's your opinion of the job Murat Yakin has done since taking over as Switzerland's coach?
Vladimir Petkovic did a fantastic job in my opinion because he really changed the attitude as well as how Switzerland played. Previously they used to defend against the top teams but he changed it so that they took them on, toe-to-toe. Petkovic was really good with a high-pressure approach and making the ball work and Murat looks to keep up the same ways. I'm happy too about Murat's appointment because he knows the players and he has been involved with Swiss football for so long.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

TEMURI KETSBAIA

"It was a bad moment for me, and I said it was never going to happen again"

The former Newcastle United and Georgia winger looks back at his playing days, his current role as Anorthosis Famagusta coach and *that* goal celebration…

As a player, how important was it for you to get the chance to play abroad, first with Anorthosis Famagusta and then AEK Athens?
I played in the Soviet Union championship for three years [at Dinamo Tbilisi]. I had some offers to go elsewhere in Europe but, because the Georgian Federation left the Soviet Union to create our own championship, we weren't allowed to play in European competition. We were banned for the decision we made.

In the first year, we won the Georgian championship, and I was named the best player. I was hoping to go somewhere. I had an offer from Russia, but it was a difficult time for my family and we didn't have a good relationship with Russia. When I was 23, I accepted an offer from Cyprus. I was there for three years and then spent three years in Greece, so I was 29 when I went to England.

How did your move to Newcastle happen?
I was playing in Greece [for AEK Athens] and we played in the quarter-final [of the European Cup Winners' Cup] against Paris Saint-Germain. I didn't know, but Kenny Dalglish came to watch. Some of my friends had sent videos of me playing in Greece.

I got a call that Newcastle were interested in me. I was in the last year of my contract and I was going to be a free agent in a few months. We spoke and, in the March, I signed. It was impossible to say that I'd signed for another club while I was playing in Greece because I would have had problems, so we had to keep it a secret that I was moving to England.

What were your impressions of the club?
At that time, Newcastle were challenging for the championship. We had a very good team, and a great manager in Dalglish, who gave me the opportunity to play at such a high level. It's not easy bringing a player from Greece to play in the Premier League, especially when you're challenging for the title.

I was so happy – this was what I'd been dreaming about for my whole career.

What did it mean to score the goal that sent Newcastle into the Champions League group stage for the first time?
We started the season very well and we were playing against Dinamo Zagreb. I got the chance to be involved in the game and I scored three minutes before the end of extra time. It was unbelievable. It was such a joy.

You mentioned how strong that Newcastle team was. Which players in particular stood out to you?
We had so many international players – Alan Shearer, Rob Lee, Philippe Albert. I had so many world-class players around me, which is always nice. Shearer was a fantastic player. It's no accident that he's still the highest goalscorer in the Premier League. He scored so many goals everywhere he played. It was great to play alongside him.

Talk us through your famous goal celebration after scoring against Bolton Wanderers in 1998 – what was going through your head at the time?
I wasn't playing as much as I'd like to. It was a bad moment for me to score a goal and express all my disappointment. I had a chat with the manager after the game, in front of the players and staff, and said that I was very sorry. It was a bad moment for me, and I said it was never going to happen again. We'd had some ups and downs in the league and that was an important goal and an important three points.

You played in the 1998 and 1999 FA Cup finals. What do you remember about those occasions?
We were unlucky because we played against two great teams in Arsenal and Manchester United. They both won the championship, and Manchester United also won the Champions League that year. It was very difficult for us to win the cup but it's nice to have been involved in two FA Cup finals at the old Wembley. ➤

Why did your time at Newcastle come to an end under Bobby Robson in 2000?
I had two more years left on my contract, but I saw that I wasn't going to have the opportunity to play. I spoke to the manager and said: "Okay, I see that my time is over here. I don't want to stay. I just want to go and play." I never wanted to leave, because I'd signed a three-year contract, but I wasn't young anymore and I had no chance to play, so it was a decision that I had to make.

Only a handful of Georgian players have appeared in the Premier League. Aside from yourself, Georgi Kinkladze is perhaps the most famous.
He was a great, great talent, but unfortunately he didn't take football too seriously. With the talent he had, he didn't achieve even half of what he could have done. He was a magnificent player. I also had talent, but I worked very hard. He only played football with his talent.

He was young when he went to Manchester City, with all the publicity. He didn't have good people around to give him advice. I believe that he could have played for much better teams. He had the opportunity when he went to Ajax, but, after he left there, he went to Derby County. If he worked as hard as I worked, I believe he would have been one of the best players in the world.

What motivated you to become a manager?
To be honest, I didn't have time to think about it. I was still playing football [for Anorthosis Famagusta] when they offered me the manager's job. In 2004, the manager left. The president called me and said: "We want you to coach, and also play." It was very difficult. You have to be the best player on the pitch and you have to get the result. There's so much pressure. Now I think: "How was it possible to do all of this together?" It was really very hard. In my first year, 2004-05, we won the championship. After that, I slowly finished playing football and now I'm just a manager.

Top team-mate... Alan Shearer celebrating with Ketsbaia

How would you describe yourself as a manager?
When I was a player, it was important to me to feel like I was getting the opportunities I deserved. As a manager, this is what I want my players to feel. Our strength is that we bring players in and we help them to play at a level they never believed they could. Winning championships, winning cups and qualifying for the Champions League.

You played under lots of different managers during your career. Who had the biggest influence on the way you view football and the type of manager you want to be?
I had some great managers. In Cyprus I was working with Anghel Iordanescu, a Romanian who also coached their national team. In Greece there was Dusan Bajevic, who was the Bosnian national team coach until recently. Of course, in England there was Kenny Dalglish, Ruud Gullit, Bobby Robson, and Colin Lee when I went to Wolverhampton Wanderers. I've learned a lot from all the coaches I've had. When you have so much experience from working with those people for years, it's a big help when you become a manager.

You managed Georgia from 2009 to 2014. How would you assess the current state of the national team?
Georgia was full of talented players before, but now we are struggling. The Georgian league isn't a good standard so it's difficult to bring the players from there to play with the national team. We don't have many players playing abroad in big countries. We have one goalkeeper who plays for Valencia – Giorgi Mamardashvili. He's very good. Some players play in Russia, Belgium or Cyprus. With the people around football in Georgia making decisions, I don't think we will see improvements for years.

"Bad moment"... Ketsbaia's crazy celebration

National manager...Kestbaia spent five years in charge of Georgia between 2009 and 2014

You had two spells at Anorthosis Famagusta as a player, and now you're back in your second spell as manager. What keeps drawing you back?
I came here 30 years ago and met my wife, so we came back when we finished our tour of Europe – Greece, England, Scotland. This was the team who gave me the first opportunity to go abroad and realise my dreams. The team and the people helped me.

They had similar problems here to what we had in Georgia; the occupation by Turkey is like what we went through with Russia. I'm a refugee and this is a refugee team, so we have some similarities in the problems that we faced. This team represents what happened in Cyprus, but also, for me, what happened with my family in Georgia.

What are the challenges that you face as Anorthosis manager?
The problem we have here is having to change seven, eight, maybe ten players each year. You're building a new team every year and you don't have time because you finish the championship and after one month you have to start pre-season.

Sometimes when people hear that you're working in Cyprus there's not much recognition. But it's very difficult to create a team here and achieve with no money, no facilities, nothing. In Europe, we play against teams whose budget is maybe ten or 20 times bigger than ours. We're fighting with them, and sometimes winning. It's not easy, especially in the European games, but we manage it.

> "I'm a refugee and this is a refugee team"

Having played and managed there, how would you describe football in Cyprus? How has it changed over the last 30 years?
When I came, it was amateur. The players were working and came to training from their jobs. But now we're fully professional and I believe football in Cyprus is doing very well. We are 18th in the [UEFA coefficients] rankings, which is a great result for such a small country. A lot of star players are coming here because they want to play and life is good here.

What are your ambitions for the future? What do you still hope to achieve as a manager?
First, I want to win the championship again, win the cup and qualify for Europe. So far, we're doing very well, and we hope that will continue.

I also hope that someday I will get the chance to manage a big club in a big country. I want to get the chances that I had as a player. I had some offers last year, but I have a two-year contract, and I don't want to just leave the club. I want to finish my job here and then, if I get the chance, I will make a decision.

Interview by Sean Cole

Coach...Ketsbaia has also managed Olympiakos, APOEL, AEK Athens and Orenburg

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TEN OUT OF TEN

There is more to the Ajax coach than meets the eye

Words: Klaas-Jan Droppert

Erik ten Hag is a man in demand. The Ajax coach is one of the leading contenders to take the manager's job at Manchester United this summer, having already been considered among the main candidates when Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was sacked last autumn. Then he decided to stay with the Amsterdam club, just as he did when the national team came knocking with the chance to succeed Frank de Boer.

But this time, things could be different. Ajax are in turmoil: director and close friend Marc Overmars resigned after sending a series of "inappropriate messages" to female colleagues, thereby increasing speculation that Ten Hag won't stay in Amsterdam until the summer of 2023, when his current contract expires. The two men have a close relationship – not just professionally – and are the architects of Ajax's recent success thanks to a shrewd transfer policy and clever composition of the squad.

It is not crazy to suggest that Ten Hag won't want to continue without Overmars, and Old Trafford seems to be an attractive destination.

Not that a job offer from the Red Devils is guaranteed: the 52-year-old faces stiff competition from the likes of Mauricio Pochettino, whose days at Paris Saint-Germain are said to be numbered, and is rumoured to be the most popular choice among the most influential players in the dressing room at Old Trafford.

Being regarded as second choice is a familiar experience for Ten Hag. In the beginning, he wasn't exactly what the Ajax fans had hoped for. Amsterdammers are the kind of people that often think that their city is the place to be and that across the city limits people still live in the Dark Ages. For their football club, a city icon, they want a flamboyant, progressive and charismatic jet set man of the world. A household name, because image is everything.

Ten Hag, who is splendidly imitated in a popular Dutch TV show, is the opposite of all that. A modest football

career at low-profile clubs like FC Twente, De Graafschap, FC Utrecht and RKC Waalwijk, and never a candidate for a top club. A guy with the appearance of a peasant from the rural eastern part of the Netherlands, speaking an unintelligible accent in staccato sentences with a rusty voice. No wonder Ten Hag was greeted with suspicion rather than welcomed with open arms.

He arrived halfway through the 2017-18 season after Marcel Keizer had been sacked. His start was shaky. Results and play were poor and no prizes were collected in his first months. It didn't take long before many hankered for Peter Bosz, the man who led Ajax to the Europa League final against United in 2017.

Yet a study of Ten Hag's track record suggested that he was worth persevering with. At all of his previous clubs he was highly successful, getting the most out of a squad. He worked as an assistant coach at Twente and PSV, then, in his first year as a head coach, steered Go Ahead Eagles to promotion. With FC Utrecht he reached the cup final, while Pep Guardiola knew what he was doing when he opted for Ten Hag as coach of Bayern Munich's reserves.

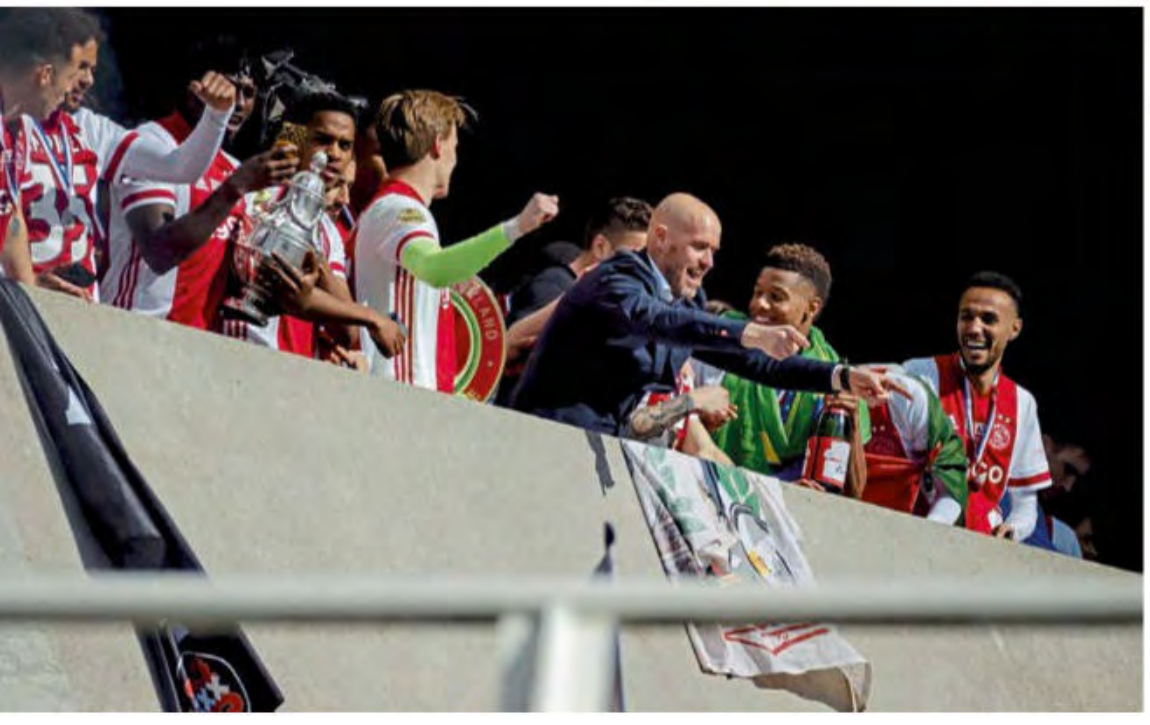
Ajax fans are dreaming that Ten Hag can take his team even further than in 2019

All that Ten Hag needed at Ajax was a little bit of help, which he duly received: Dusan Tadic arrived, Daley Blind returned and mega talents Matthijs de Ligt and Frenkie de Jong emerged. Hakim Ziyech and Andre Onana also came to the fore, even if still having not quite fulfilled their potential.

Stubborn, determined, disciplined, clever, meticulously well-prepared, obsessed by the game and always sticking to his philosophy, Ten Hag turned Ajax into a team that would melt the heart of every football fan around the world.

For the first time since 2002, the Amsterdam club clinched the double (title and cup), but what happened in the Champions League was far more impressive – attractive and attack-minded football similar to the days when Ajax won the European Cup three times in the early 1970s. Players like Tadic, De Ligt and De Jong were among the most wanted players on the planet. With

Champions League...Ten Hag celebrates his side's 2019 victory over Juventus



Champions...Ajax players celebrate winning last season's domestic double

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

PEP GUARDIOLA

Ten Hag is headstrong, yet even he couldn't fail to be hugely influence by Guardiola. Between 2013 and 2015, the Dutchman was manager of Bayern Munich's reserve team while Pep was at the helm of the first team. Ten Hag once said: "His philosophy is sensational, what he did in Barcelona, Bayern Munich and now with Manchester City, that attacking and attractive style sees him win a lot. It's this structure that I've tried to implement with Ajax."

FRED RUTTEN

A close friend of Ten Haag's, first playing alongside him at FC Twente, then managing him, and later appointing him as his assistant at the Eredivisie club. When Rutten became manager of PSV, he took Ten Hag with him. Known as the best trainer in the Netherlands but, like Ten Hag, his presentation lets him down.

SIMON KISTEMAKER

Ten Hag's coach at De Graafschap in the early 1990s. Under him, the Doetinchem-based club played like a lower-league English side, demanding discipline, a fighting spirit and a tactic that boiled down to: go straight for the opponent's goal. Far from the type of play that Ten Hag uses at Ajax, but he had an enormous respect for Kistemaker. "Simon helped me during my career, he was convincing, always played in a recognisable style and everybody knew what he should do." He remained close to Kistemaker, and spoke at his funeral last November.

breathtaking football Real Madrid and Juventus were outplayed. If only Lucas Moura hadn't played the match of his life and scored the decider in the dying seconds, it would have been Ajax instead of Tottenham Hotspur facing Liverpool in the Champions League final. Many labelled Ten Hag's Ajax as the season's real champions.

But every success has its downside and the departure of key players like De Jong and De Ligt were inevitable. Ten Hag had to start all over again. The following season started well but after the winter break Ajax slid in Europe and at home. In the end they were saved by the bell when, due to the COVID pandemic, the league was abandoned.

With Ziyech and Donny van de Beek leaving in the summer of 2020, it was interesting to see how Ten Hag would react. Talented players like Mohammed Kudus and Antony arrived, while Ryan Gravenberch emerged on the scene. And, halfway through the season, Ajax's lack of a target man was also solved when Ten Hag contacted Sebastien Haller, with whom he had worked at FC Utrecht.

Last year's admin error that caused the Ivorian to miss the knockout stages aside, Haller proved an inspired signing. With ten goals, he was the star of the show as Ajax won all of their Champions League group games this season. Now, fans are dreaming that Ten Hag can take his team even further than in 2019.

With such results and determination Ten Hag is ready for one of Europe's giants, although the expectations will immediately be high.

The best thing Manchester United can do if they do indeed target Ten Hag once Ralf Rangnick's interim spell ends, is something that is rather unusual at the top: give him time. It will pay off because they will be surprised by his vast potential. Because when it comes to Ten Hag there is more than meets the eye.

Captain fantastic...Dusan Tadic lifts the 2020-21 KNVB Dutch Cup with Ten Hag looking on

6 of the best

Uncapped World Cup hopefuls

Jamie Evans takes a look at the players hoping to make their international bows ahead of Qatar 2022

1 Jacob RAMSEY

ASTON VILLA

At this stage, Ramsey must be considered an outsider for the World Cup, not least because of the options that Gareth Southgate already has at his disposal.

Then again, given that the youngster was barely considered an Aston Villa first-team option at the start of the season, it would be foolish to underestimate him. And Southgate has already proven that if you're good enough, you're old enough, blooding the likes of Bukayo Saka, Jude Bellingham and Phil Foden without hesitation.

Ramsey's progress this season has been remarkable, particularly since the arrival of manager Steven Gerrard. The perfect role model for any English midfielder, Gerrard has tapped into the 20-year-old's potential and quickly made him a mainstay of his team. Just how high is his ceiling? Only time will tell.

2 Christopher NKUNKU

RB LEIPZIG

It is testament to France's incredible strength in depth that Nkunku has never won a senior international cap. While the 24-year-old's versatility may have counted against him (he can play as a box-to-box midfielder, wide man, centre-forward or support striker) his form this season surely makes it impossible for Didier Deschamps to continue ignoring him.

Not only has he registered double figures in the Bundesliga – already his best-ever league return by far – he also struck seven goals in the Champions League group stage, including a hat-trick against Manchester City. That treble may well have been the first of many for Nkunku in Manchester, with United reportedly interested in a summer move.

3 Gabriel MARTINELLI

ARSENAL

Recently hailed by Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp as "outstanding" and that "everybody should remember that name," Martinelli's talent is beyond question. The problem for the 20-year-old's international hopes is that Brazil are hardly short of wide forwards at the moment.

The Arsenal forward is known to the Brazilian set-up, having played his part in last year's victorious Olympic campaign and trained with the seniors ahead of the 2019 Copa America. Yet for now, he remains very much down the pecking order for Qatar.

After the departure of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, he has the opportunity to become Arsenal's talisman. If he can achieve that, he may well muscle his way into the *Selecao* squad.

4 Sven BOTMAN

LILLE

Botman, we were told in January, was the top defensive transfer target for Newcastle United's new Saudi owners, but their offers were ultimately rejected by Lille.

The decision to turn down big money for him is testament not only to Botman's importance to the squad (he only missed one game on the road to last season's Ligue 1 title), but how much he could be worth in the near future.

Still only 22, his lack of *Oranje* action is primarily a result of the exceptional depth the Netherlands have at centre-back. Although, having left Ajax in 2020 in order to get first-team football, it would seem he still has a point to prove in his home country.

5 SEOL Young-woo

ULSAN HYUNDAI

Of the ten most-used players in South Korea's World Cup qualifying campaign thus far, only three have been below the age of 29, so the rest of 2022 must surely be used to introduce some fresh blood to the squad.

As the K-League's Young Player of the Year for 2021, Seol is an obvious candidate for promotion. Described by *World Soccer*'s John Duerden as "calm in the tackle and in possession", he was a regular at left-back for league champions Ulsan Hyundai.

He was deployed on the right at the Olympics, and may well be seen as a long-term successor to the incumbent right-back, 35-year-old Lee Yong.

6 Thiago ALMADA

ATLANTA UNITED

Atlanta's record signing will hope that Argentina boss Lionel Scaloni gets over his apparent reluctance to call up players from MLS. Several players have made an impact in the league without earning international honours – including 2021 Golden Boot winner Valentin Castellanos and Ezequiel Barco, who has just signed for River Plate after zero Argentina caps in three seasons with Atlanta.

But if any player can buck the trend, it might be Almada. Long-tipped as one of Argentina's most exciting young prospects and the heir to Messi's throne, Atlanta spent $16 million to sign the 20-year-old forward. If his form in MLS matches his reputation, it will be hard for Scaloni to ignore him.

Glenn Moore

Euro faves warm up for the summer

Leading nations take part in various short tournaments to prepare for this summer's European Championship

Champions... the Lionesses lift the Arnold Clark Cup trophy

With Euro 2022 fast approaching there was encouragement for England, France, Sweden and Belgium, each of whom won one of the tournaments that have long marked the start of the international year in women's football.

England, who will stage the finals, achieved the most notable victory, heading a quartet that included Spain, Germany and Canada in a home-hosted competition.

France, however, had the most impressive results, beating Brazil, Netherlands and Finland in the second Tournoi de France.

In Iberia, Sweden lifted the long-established Algarve Cup by defeating Italy in a penalty shootout, while Belgium won the Pinatar Cup in southeast Spain.

Of the 16 qualifiers, only four did not play in these tournaments. Iceland featured in the SheBelieves Cup in the USA, beating New Zealand and Czech Republic before losing 5-0 to the hosts. Northern Ireland, Austria and Switzerland played friendlies in Spain, including some against each other.

England's tournament, incongruously named after a car dealer, was a new one. The quality of the visitors was testament both to the national team's improved standing since their 2015 World Cup semi-final finish, and the fact that they are this summer's hosts. Not that any of the Euros venues were utilised.

Germany were not at full strength, affected by COVID-enforced withdrawals and injuries. It showed as they won just a solitary point, courtesy of a late equaliser against Spain.

Canada, the Olympic champions, were more impressive despite half of the squad being out of season. As resilient and organised as ever, they held England to a 1-1 draw and beat Germany 1-0, before losing by the same score to Spain.

That meant the key match – and the most awaited – proved to be that between England and Spain. However, both teams rotated players, especially England who were thus delighted to match an XI still heavily based on European champions Barcelona.

They then beat Germany 3-1, a first victory against the eight-time European champions on home soil after 25 failures, to win the inaugural competition via the unexpected goalscoring prowess of defender Millie Bright.

> England, who will stage the Euros, achieved the most notable victory, heading a quartet that included Spain, Germany and Olympic gold medallists Canada

England, like most of the contenders, have previously been forced to attempt to tune up for the Euros by thrashing under-resourced cannon-fodder in World Cup qualifying.

Sarina Wiegman, who was headhunted for the Lionesses' head coach role after leading the Dutch to home success at Euro 2017, had kicked off with six successive wins during which England scored 53 goals and conceded none. As the Americans have begun to find, this is all very entertaining, but not much use when it comes to developing a team to go toe-to-toe with the best.

Goalscorers... Millie Bright and Ellen White

Against Canada, Wiegman unveiled a new midfield double-pivot, a more defensive take on the 4-3-3 England have mostly played for several years now. Arsenal's Leah Williamson, stand-in captain (and likely to become the permanent one) for the injury-dogged Steph Houghton, was switched from her central defensive berth to pair Manchester City's Keira Walsh.

The partnership was an instant success and is likely to be the platform from which Wiegman will launch England's bid for a first major tournament.

The breakout star, however, was Spain's Real Madrid winger Athenea del Castillo. The 21-year-old was only called into the squad after Barcelona's Mariona Caldentey was injured in the opening game. Introduced from the bench against England she was a real threat giving the 2020 FIFA Best Women's Player Lucy Bronze a tough time. Del Castillo backed up that performance against Canada to be named Player of the Tournament despite only playing in half of it.

Across the Channel, France began with a 5-0 win over an out-of-season Finnish team before defeating Brazil 2-1 in a much closer match. Marie-Antoinette Katoto scored twice and the 23-year-old Paris Saint-Germain striker, who could be a key figure in the summer, added another brace in a relatively comfortable 3-1 despatch of the Dutch.

Netherlands coach Mark Parsons felt his team underperformed, making too many mistakes, and blamed his own preparation. The Dutch had earlier drawn 1-1 with Brazil and beaten Finland 3-0.

Kheira Hamraoui – who was at the centre of a still-unsolved, notorious assault when dragged from a car by masked men in November – made her first appearance under manager Corinne Diacre. Against Brazil she played a full 90 minutes for France for the first time since 2016, overcoming an early mistake, which gave Marta her second penalty of the tournament, to set up the equaliser.

In Portugal the five-team Algarve Cup was disrupted when Denmark, who had lost their opening match 1-0 to Italy, were forced to withdraw after four players tested positive for COVID-19.

Italy went on to beat a disappointing Norway team to meet Sweden in the final. After a 1-1 draw, Sweden won the penalty shootout with six successful kicks. How they would have wished for such a conversion rate in the Olympic final in Tokyo, when they only scored two from six.

Veteran Caroline Seger, who would have clinched the gold had she scored her kick in Japan, went first and scored, just as she had in normal time to cancel

Impressive...France forward Marie-Antoinette Katoto

out Valentina Giacinti's early goal. Norway, having lost 2-0 to Portugal in the group stage, reversed the score to come third.

With Russia likely to be ejected, Belgium were probably the only team of the eight at the Pinatar Cup who will be at the Euros. They justified that status by winning it, albeit taking two of their three matches on penalties, including the final against the Russians.

Elsewhere in Spain, Austria impressed with victories over Switzerland (3-0) and Romania (6-0), while Northern Ireland had a more mixed performance, beating the Faroe Islands, drawing with the Swiss and losing to Romania.

That wouldn't seem to auger well, but Rachel Furness pointed out that when she played Switzerland in 2015 Northern Ireland lost 8-1. Further improvement is expected as, besides English-based players like Liverpool's Furness, government backing has enabled 22 home-based players to train full-time until the Euros.

With several months still to go Northern Ireland, like the other qualifiers, will be hoping to peak when it matters most.

Round-up

Russia banned... midfielder Yana Sheina in action against Belgium

RUSSIA SET TO MISS EUROS

Russia's appearance in the Pinatar Cup final may be their last for a while. Two days after the match, Russia launched the invasion of Ukraine, and just four days later FIFA and UEFA announced the suspension of all Russian teams from their competitions "until further notice".

While this decision was taken more than four months before the Euros, it seems highly likely Russia will be expelled from the competition. Portugal, beaten by Russia in the play-offs, are the most likely replacements though Scotland are the highest-ranked team not to qualify.

Portugal had the best record in qualifiers of the teams that haven't made it, and beat Scotland home and away in the group stages. The decision is at UEFA's discretion.

THREE IN A ROW FOR USA

The United States, as expected, won the SheBelieves Cup for the third consecutive occasion, taking their overall tally in the competition to five. Only France (2017) and England (2019) have ever pipped the US to their home tournament.

SheBelieves Cup... USA's Catarina Macario celebrates

While the headlines were stolen by unfortunate New Zealand defender Meikayla Moore for her hat-trick of own goals against the hosts, it was another dominant performance by USA, sealing 5-0 wins against both Iceland and the Ferns, taking their current unbeaten streak to ten matches since their defeat to Canada at the Olympics.

US SETTLE EQUAL PAY BATTLE

The six-year long equal pay dispute between the US team and their employers has finally been settled. US Soccer Federation agreed to pay $22m in compensation, plus $2m towards players' charitable aims, and committed to equal pay – including bonuses – going forward. The deal is regarded as a victory for the players, though they had asked for $67m, as they had been struggling in the courtroom.

Critical... former USWNT goalkeeper Hope Solo

Influential midfielder Megan Rapinoe described the verdict as "an incredible turning point in the history of US Soccer," although her former team-mate Hope Solo was more critical. "This settlement is not a 'huge win'. It's heartbreaking and infuriating," the former goalkeeper for the national team said on Twitter. "A 'promise' of equal pay from the Federation and backpay for a select group of players isn't equal pay."

"Throughout the entire process, Rapinoe & [Alex] Morgan were the two most agreeable with USSF and to this day, continue to accept terms that are nowhere near what we set out to do. They both know this is not a win."

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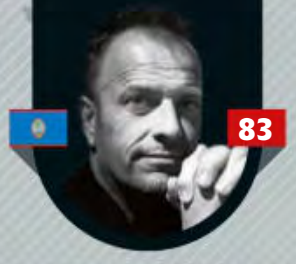

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Preview...2022 Campeonato Brasileiro Serie A season

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

1

By scoring three goals for Barcelona against Valencia, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang became the first player this century to hit a hat-trick in the Premier League, Bundesliga, Ligue 1 and La Liga.

Hat-trick hero... Barca new boy Aubameyang

2

African FAs that have been suspended by FIFA for government interference – Kenya and Zimbabwe.

$24m

Value of settlement for the US Women's soccer team in their case against their governing body.

10

Matches that Morton manager Dougie Imrie will be banned for (four of them suspended) after being found guilty of historic betting offences by the Scottish FA.

37

Premier League goal combinations between Tottenham duo Harry Kane and Son Heung-min after hammering Leeds United 4-0 in February, taking them past the all-time record held by Didier Drogba and Frank Lampard.

9

CONMEBOL teams beaten by Argentina under manager Lionel Scaloni – making him the first *Albiceleste* coach in history to beat all nine South American nations.

47

Years since Bayern Munich last conceded four goals in one half – a sequence that was ended by newly-promoted Bochum in a 4-2 defeat in February.

7

Touches taken by Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku during Chelsea's Premier League fixture against Crystal Palace – one of which was directly from the kick-off.

10

Players to have scored 150 goals for Liverpool after Mohamed Salah became the latest player to add his name to the list.

€7.85m

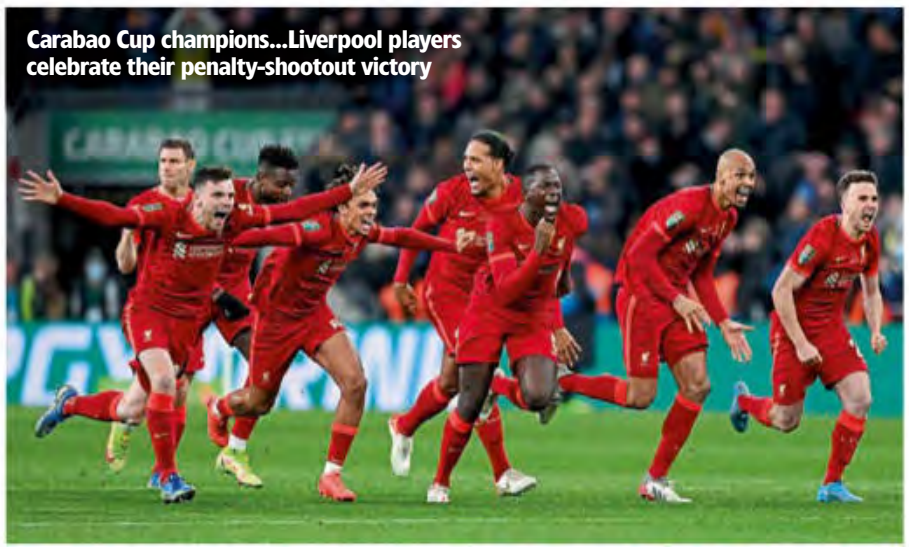
Agreed compensation package that Ajax will pay to the family of Abdelhak Nouri, after "inadequate" medical treatment left the midfielder with serious permanent brain damage.

26

Squad size that will be permitted at the Qatar World Cup, if recent FIFA propositions are approved. Five substitutions are also under consideration.

9

League Cups won by Liverpool after their final victory over Chelsea, taking them back above Manchester City as the competition's most successful club.


Carabao Cup champions...Liverpool players celebrate their penalty-shootout victory

Emotional comeback... Christian Eriksen

259

Number of days between Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest at Euro 2020 and his remarkable return to action for Brentford in the Premier League in February.

55

Percentage stake that Stephen Pagliuca, the owner of basketball team Boston Celtics, has acquired in Serie A outfit Atalanta.

£107.3m

Losses recorded by Arsenal for the financial year ending May last year, the highest-ever losses in the club's history.

32

Seconds it took Juventus striker Dusan Vlahovic to score against Villarreal – the quickest-ever debut Champions League goal.

4

Argentina players banned by CONMEBOL after September's abandoned qualifier against Brazil. Emiliano Buendia, Emiliano Martinez, Cristian Romero and Giovani Lo Celso will miss the nation's final two qualifiers.

Stepping down... Brazil boss Tite

7.5

Years that Tite will have managed the Brazil national team when he steps down from the role at the end of the year after the 2022 World Cup.

2028

The UK and Republic of Ireland FAs have agreed not to bid for the 2030 World Cup so they can instead focus on a joint-bid to host Euro 2028.

Guam

STEVE MENARY

A trip of a lifetime

Guam's national team has travelled all over the planet to fulfil its fixtures

All around the world...the Guam national team

The COVID-19 pandemic provoked an unprecedented disruption to World Cup qualifying but none of the FIFA member nations have gone through anything like Guam.

"We've already played the World Cup; we've been around the world," laughs Guam Football Association (GFA) president Tino San Gil.

After thrashing Bhutan 5-1 in the first round, the US territory from the Western Pacific were drawn in Group A with Syria, China, the Maldives and the Philippines in what were due to be home and away games.

Guam started in Autumn 2019 and had played and lost their first five qualifiers before the pandemic struck in March 2020. The Guam Soccer League was suspended and all 13 clubs have only been able to train ever since, but the national team – known as the Matao – still had three more World Cup qualifiers to fulfil.

A centralised tournament in China was proposed and Guam were drawn to play the hosts in the first game on May 30, 2021.

"Normally we'd fly via Japan but there were no flights, so we had to go via San Francisco," says San Gil, taking up the story. "Then four days before we were due to go, Chinese health officials said that five of our players who'd had COVID in 2020 and were fully vaccinated could not arrive on that commercial flight. They had to go on a charter flight."

The five players would all have been in Guam's starting XI and the GFA objected. Eventually, the Chinese authorities agreed to pay for a charter flight from Dubai. The GFA got their five players to Dubai, where they were due to share the charter with the Syrian, Filipino and Maldivian players and officials.

Then some players from all four countries tested positive for coronavirus in Dubai. The results were disputed but the charter flight never took off. The 16 Guam players had arrived in Suzhou and played China, losing 7-0.

To resolve the impasse, the Chinese authorities then flew the rump of the Guam squad and their own players to Dubai to join the teams from Syria, the Philippines and the Maldives and play the games in Sharjah.

Guam opened with a respectable 3-0 defeat to top seeds Syria. "Some guy got really angry saying how could you lose 7-0 to China but 3-0 to the top seeds and that he'd lost money because of us," says San Gil.

Guam lost by the same score to the Philippines and then went home but, due to flight availability, this time via San Francisco. "We flew one and a half times round the world and when we got back, some of the boys said they didn't want to go anywhere again," says Guam's president.

Unfortunately, in October Guam had 2023 Asian Cup qualifiers with Cambodia to fulfil.

Guam could host but Cambodia was in lockdown. So the games were again shifted to the Middle East, this time to Bahrain. To get there, the Matao flew first to Hawaii, then Los Angeles, Istanbul and Bahrain, where they lost 3-1 on aggregate.

Guam's next games should be the 2022 East Asian Football Federation Championship qualifiers with China, Hong Kong and Macau, where the away legs would involve a 21-day quarantine.

But the tournament is on hold, giving Guam's footballers a break from the arduous task of fulfilling international fixtures.

> "We flew one and a half times round the world and when we got back, some of the boys said they didn't want to go anywhere again"
>
> Tino San Gil, Guam Football Association president

Thrashed...Guam midfielder Devan Mendiola during the 7-0 defeat to China

UEFA World Cup play-offs

JARED TINSLAY

Italy...will the European champions miss out on Qatar?

Who will fall at the final hurdle?

Nations vie for Europe's final three spots at the 2022 World Cup

The Dragons... Wales' Kieffer Moore gets mobbed

The route to Qatar is a lot more complicated than a private jet ride and some complementary peanuts. Well, at least for the European nations still to compete in the UEFA play-offs. Their road to the 2022 World Cup was mapped out during last November's draw, with the countries divided into three separate "pathways". Fasten your seatbelts, because this could get bumpy.

Path A saw Wales and Scotland paired in a potential British derby, providing they can get through their semi-finals first. Both sides do have the advantage of playing at home; remember, these are single-legged games that must be determined on the day, be it through extra-time or penalties if necessary.

The Dragons, still led by caretaker coach Rob Page, are hoping to reach their first World Cup since 1958, but face an Austria side who took eventual champions Italy to extra-time in the round of 16 at last summer's European Championship.

While Wales have gone seven games unbeaten since the Euros, eventually pipping Czech Republic to second spot in their World Cup qualifying group, Austria's form has been inconsistent to say the least; they lost 5-2 to Israel in September, only to beat the same side 4-2 at home two months later.

Scotland's euphoria of reaching their first major tournament since 1998 was short-lived after they limped out in the group stage of the Euros. They do have real reason to be optimistic, though; Steve Clarke's side have won their last six games and only conceded in one of those matches.

Their opponents, Ukraine – quarter-finalists at World Cup 2006 and again at last summer's Euros – concluded an impressive qualifying campaign without defeat, despite having to play world champions France twice. But their immediate participation was cast into doubt due to the ongoing conflict in the country, and the Austrian, Scottish and Welsh FAs were already in dialogue over the crisis before Ukraine officially requested a postponement of the tie.

The format for Path B was also undecided at the time of writing following FIFA and UEFA's decision to ban Russia "until further notice" after the country's invasion of Ukraine. Whether their original opponents Poland will have to wait for the game to be re-scheduled (the Russian Football Union announced it would appeal against its ban to the Court of Arbitration for Sport), play a different opponent or receive a bye to the final remains to be seen.

If Poland do reach the final, it could see two of Europe's elite strikers lock horns in the form of Robert Lewandowski and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, in what would also be a repeat of the countries' Group E clash from last summer's Euros. Both players likely view Qatar as their final shot at the World Cup, although the latter will miss Sweden's semi-final due to an accumulation of yellow cards.

Janne Andersson's side must therefore manage without the Milan forward against semi-final opponents Czech Republic in Solna. Alexander Isak, Emil Forsberg and Dejan Kulusevski will take on the attacking burden; the same front three who put Spain to the sword in a 2-1 victory last September.

It takes a particularly strong blade to perforate the Czech net, mind, as they proved last summer; Jaroslav Silhavy's side conceded twice in four games en route to the quarter-finals, before being eliminated by Denmark. Marshalled by West Ham United defensive midfielders Alex Kral and Tomas Soucek, they're an incredibly organised 4-2-3-1 unit.

Path C could end up providing the most fireworks with the past two European champions – Italy and Portugal – seeing their World Cup hopes on the line.

It feels all too familiar for *Azzurri* supporters, who witnessed their nation get eliminated by Sweden in the 2018 World Cup play-offs, and a far cry from the ecstatic scenes of last summer at Wembley Stadium.

Suspended...Sweden's Zlatan Ibrahimovic will miss out against the Czech Republic

The fact that their semi-final opponents North Macedonia, who are ranked 67th in the world and failed to pick up a single point at Euro 2020, have won more matches since July 2021 is a damning indication of Roberto Mancini's side's feeble form.

Portugal fans will be feeling equally uneasy after their side were mere minutes away from booking their place at Qatar. They only needed to draw with Serbia at home last November, only to concede a last-minute goal to lose 2-1. Lapses of concentration can happen, but not many are normally that costly.

Tense could therefore be an understatement for the atmosphere in Porto for their semi-final with Turkey; a side who have lost just once in seven games since the Euros but have never beaten *A Selecao* in a competitive fixture.

Path B could see two of Europe's elite strikers lock horns in the final, in the form of Robert Lewandowski and Zlatan Ibrahimovic

NATIONS LEAGUE PLAY-OUTS

There's also action in the UEFA Nations League at the end of March as Moldova take on Kazakhstan, and Estonia face Cyprus in the League C relegation play-outs. The two-legged ties will see the victors remain in League C and the losers relegated to League D for the upcoming 2022-23 campaign.

Kazakhstan will be favourites against Moldova, who are 61 places below them in the FIFA World Rankings and without a competitive win since June 2019, after showing some signs of promise towards the end of 2021. That included draws with Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a friendly win over Tajikistan – admittedly, their only victory of 2021.

Cyprus currently sit one place above Estonia in the World Rankings, but the eastern European side will be slight favourites against their Mediterranean counterparts after proving tough opponents for the likes of Wales and Belarus towards the end of last year.

Nations League... Moldova face Kazakhstan

WC PLAY-OFFS DRAW

The UEFA play-off semi-finals were scheduled for March 24. The Path finals were scheduled for March 29.

PATH A

Scotland v Ukraine
Wales v Austria
Wales/Austria v Scotland/Ukraine

PATH B

Russia/TBC v Poland
Sweden v Czech Republic
Russia/TBC/Poland v Sweden/Czech Rep

PATH C

Italy v North Macedonia
Portugal v Turkey
Portugal/Turkey v Italy/N. Macedonia

CAF World Cup play-offs

MARK GLEESON

AFCON final "take two"

Senegal v Egypt tops the billing in the final stage of CAF World Cup qualifying

A reprise of the personal battle between Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah will take place just under two months after Mane came out tops in the Africa Cup of Nations final, leaving his Liverpool team-mate distraught and in tears.

Senegal, who edged seven-time winners Egypt in a penalty shootout to win the tournament in Cameroon at the beginning of February, have been drawn against the Pharaohs in a two-legged play-off at the end of March to decide one of Africa's five places at this year's World Cup finals.

The monster tie vastly overshadows another four intriguing showdowns as the winners of the ten qualifying groups, decided in the space of just three months between September and November last year, clash in five decisive two-legged ties with the aggregate victors advancing to Qatar this winter.

Algeria take on Cameroon, Ghana play Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo are up against Morocco, while Mali meet Tunisia.

Senegal were top seeds with Egypt in the pot of unseeded teams for the draw, which was conducted during the Cup of Nations tournament. Had it been held afterwards, Egypt would also have been in the top bracket, with their performance in Cameroon taking them up the FIFA rankings. Instead, they now face a daunting repeat of that final in Yaounde.

But while Mane and compatriots will be marginal favourites, they will be all too aware of Egypt's experience in matches of this magnitude. The first leg is in Cairo and Senegal will host the second leg on March 29 in their

Rematch... Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah in discussion during the AFCON final

Point to prove... Algeria were dumped out in the AFCON group stage

newly-built Diamniadio Olympic Stadium in Dakar, likely to be as much of a celebration of their Nations Cup triumph as it will be the opportunity to qualify for a third World Cup finals appearance.

Egypt have only been to three themselves, a record that is in stark contrast to their record haul of AFCON titles, and is in spite of the fact that they were the first African country at a World Cup, way back in 1934.

Of the ten African candidates for a place in Qatar, only Mali have never made it previously. Their clash against Tunisia pits two countries of potential but who might prove unworthy of a World Cup place given how they performed at the Cup of Nations in Cameroon.

Much more was expected of both nations, but Mali losing to lowly Equatorial Guinea – albeit on a penalty shootout – in the round of 16 laid bare their limitations while Tunisia got to the quarter-finals despite more defeats than games won.

Mali have, since the finals in Cameroon, made overtures to ex-French youth international Moussa Dembele to switch international allegiance (having already successfully convinced Everton midfielder Abdoulaye Doucoure to do so), and intend to ask Frederic Kanoute and former Liverpool midfielder Momo Sissoko to join their coaching staff.

While Mane and compatriots will be marginal favourites, they will be all too aware of Egypt's experience in matches of this magnitude

It is a wide-open tie with Mali given the boost of being able to host the first leg on March 25 in Bamako. During last year's group qualifiers they had been forced to play their home ties in Morocco because all stadia in Mali were declared not up to the required standard for World Cup matches. The March 26 Stadium in Bamako, site of the 2002 Cup of Nations final, has since been renovated and passed fit for use.

Ghana and Nigeria both made coaching changes after Cameroon. The Black Stars' dismal opening-round exit ended the brief second tenure of Milovan Rajevac, who was in charge when they reached the 2010 World Cup quarter-finals, and he has been replaced by Eric Addo, German-born former Ghana international who is a youth team coach at Borussia Dortmund. Chris Hughton will assist him for the two ties.

Nigeria were supposed to have Portuguese Jose Peseiro as their new coach for the play-offs, but changed their mind and are keeping technical director Augustine Eguavoen on in the post, despite the fact they went out in the round of 16 at the Cup of Nations finals.

Ghana against Nigeria keeps up a long-standing, but infrequent, rivalry between the two West African giants. Their last competitive meeting was in the 2010 Cup of Nations semi-final in Angola where Asamoah Gyan's goal won it for Ghana.

DR Congo qualified for the 1974 World Cup as Zaire and are outsiders for their tie against Morocco. The Congolese did not qualify for the Cup of Nations finals but held a training camp in Bahrain in January under veteran coach Hector Cuper.

Cameroon and Algeria will have to lick their wounds before their tussle. Both have World Cup pedigree with Cameroon seven times past qualifiers (an all-time African record) and Algeria making the last of their four appearances in Brazil in 2014, when they came close to upsetting eventual winners Germany in the round of 16.

Mali target...Lyon striker Moussa Dembele

Reinstated...Nigeria boss Augustine Eguavoen

WC PLAY-OFFS DRAW

The first legs take place on March 25 with the second legs due on March 29.

- Egypt v Senegal
- Cameroon v Algeria
- Ghana v Nigeria
- DR Congo v Morocco
- Mali v Tunisia

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Leading contenders... Libertadores finalists Palmeiras and Flamengo

Three to beat

Brazil's newly-established "Big Three" of Flamengo, Atletico Mineiro and Palmeiras will take some stopping in the 2022 national championship

Brazil likes to refer to its championship as the most open and competitive in the world, where 12 traditional giants go into the competition with equal chances of victory. But times have changed. Cruzeiro and Vasco da Gama face another season in the second division, joined this year by Gremio. New forces are emerging. And the country now has a "Big Three" – a trio of clubs who have won the major titles over the last four campaigns. But there are interesting question marks over all three.

2018 champions Palmeiras have won the last two versions of the Copa Libertadores. The low-risk approach of Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira seems better suited to cups than prolonged leagues. Can he add more to the team's repertoire in 2022?

The last two champions, Flamengo (2019 and 2020) and current holders Atletico Mineiro both have new foreign coaches taking their first tentative steps in Brazilian football. In late February they met in the Supercopa – a competition between the league and cup champions – when a pulsating 2-2 draw was followed by an epic penalty shootout, eventually won by Atletico. Their new coach, Argentina's Antonio Mohamed, inherits a double-winning side and has less to fix than Paulo Sousa, the Portuguese who has taken charge of Flamengo and has the mission of taking the club out of the shadow of their all conquering 2019 side, coached by his compatriot Jorge Jesus.

Taking charge of Atletico was a brave step for Mohamed: his predecessor, Cuca, stepped down for personal reasons rather than any failings, and it will be difficult to improve on last year's performance in 2022. And, after a year without a trophy, Flamengo fans will be quick to turn on Paulo Sousa if they are not happy with his changes, such as the back three marshalled by David Luiz. Both sides produced enough in the Supercopa to have grounds for optimism, and Flamengo's array of

Holders...Atletico Mineiro lifted last season's title

attacking talent will be hard for their opponents to hold.

Might anyone else mount a challenge? Corinthians last won the title in 2017, and are emerging from the financial problems that have hit them hard since then. They have bought in plenty of quality – Renato Augusto, Willian, Paulinho, Giuliano – but the squad is ageing, a factor which is surely making it harder for them to find a coach after sacking former Arsenal and Barcelona left-back Sylvinho in February. The Santos squad is full of highly-talented youngsters, but they too are looking for a coach after the February sacking of Fabio Carrille, who saved them from relegation last year.

Sao Paulo seem mired in political turmoil – and while some of the traditional forces struggle, Red Bull Bragantino are well on the way towards consolidating themselves in the top half of the first division. They lost in the final of last year's Sudamericana (Europa League equivalent) to Athletico Paranaense, a well-run club with a clear strategy. Feeling that the league is beyond their resources, they concentrate their efforts on the cup competitions. In the cluttered calendar of the Brazilian game, choosing priorities is important – and it will be fascinating to see how Fortaleza deal with this in 2022.

Under impressive Argentine coach Juan Pablo Vojvoda, Fortaleza were the sensation of last year, finishing fourth.

Might anyone else mount a challenge? Corinthians last won the title in 2017, and are emerging from the financial problems that have hit them hard since then

By the end of the season they looked low on gas, and this year, with the club making its Copa Libertadores debut, the demands will be greater. The Brazilian Championship is extremely hard on them and their local rivals Ceara. They are the only teams from the North East, meaning that almost every away game is a very long trip.

At the other end of the country, Internacional will be interesting under new Uruguayan coach Alexander Medina – who will hope to be shown more patience than Miguel Angel Ramirez, the highly-rated Spaniard who lasted just three months in the job a year ago. Medina clearly wants to defend with a high line – especially risky in Brazil as it meets cultural resistance. At the other end, Wesley, on loan from Aston Villa could be an effective re-enforcement if he has recovered from his injury issues.

America Mineiro, who punched well above their weight last year, and Fluminense will attempt to negotiate a tricky path through the qualifying rounds of the Libertadores – and their fate in the continental competition will clearly have an effect on their form and finances in the domestic league.

The other sides – Juventude, Cuiaba, Atletico Goianiense plus the promoted quartet of Botafogo, Coritiba, Goias and Avai – will go into the campaign mainly hoping that come the end of the season four clubs finish below them, and that a cup run might offer them a shot at glory.

Rejuvenated... Willian is one of several new faces at Corinthians

Surprise package... Fortaleza coach Juan Pablo Vojvoda

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Asia watches Africa Cup of Nations with envy

Global audience for AFCON leaves Asian football asking: why not us?

The world watched in February as Senegal defeated Egypt on penalties to win the Africa Cup of Nations for the first time. For those tuning in from Asia, there must have been more than a little twinge of envy at the international coverage the tournament received for three weeks.

AFCON takes place every two years, in normal times, but still receives a good deal more international attention than the quadrennial Asian Cup. Further east, unless there is a major news story, there is little global coverage.

War-torn Iraq winning the 2007 tournament just four years after being invaded and with a team that represented its major religious communities stands out; it is not often that a sitting US President talks about Asian football. There was, to a lesser extent, some interest in Qatar winning the 2019 tournament at the home of the United Arab Emirates, one of the countries that were taking part in a diplomatic boycott against the 2022 World Cup. Much of the international interest in Asian football focuses on

Global event...an estimated worldwide audience of 65 million tuned in for Senegal's victory in Cameroon

Big names...African superstars attract a global audience

the wider issues such as corruption, match-fixing or political interference from dictators or military juntas. There is still not much outside interest in the actual football.

Games from Africa in January and February were reported all over the international media. There were minute-by-minute reports, all games shown live by major broadcasters and analyses of football trends and styles. This may be a positive for African football but little of this applies when it comes to Asia's big tournament.

Time zones help Africa but there is also the obvious fact that there are a lot more internationally recognisable African players. The final between Egypt and Senegal was billed, in part, as a mega meeting between Liverpool team-mates Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane. Yet Senegal also had a team full of European stars who play for Chelsea, Milan, Napoli, Marseille, Paris Saint-Germain, Bayern Munich and Leicester City. Even smaller nations like Gabon and Guinea can boast world-famous stars such as Naby Keita of Liverpool and Barcelona's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

AFCON then remains a much easier sell to an international audience simply because there are many more internationally recognisable faces there. Almost every game in the tournament, especially when the knockout stages get going, feature players familiar to all football fans.

Asian nations can't match that in terms of either quantity or quality. Apart from South Korea, Japan, Iran and Australia, there are few eastern exports active in the west. Son Heung-min is the obvious and biggest name, and a clash between Japan and South Korea could see Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal, Celtic, Sampdoria, Bordeaux and Wolverhampton Wanderers represented on the pitch. Iran have Mehdi Taremi of Porto and new Bayer Leverkusen striker Sardar Azmoun plus a growing number of respected European-based stars, while the Socceroos have players all over the world – even if names like Tom Rogic, Aaron Mooy and Maty Ryan have not matched the careers and the stature of members of the so-called "golden generation" of Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka and Tim Cahill. But other countries have yet to produce international stars.

Those same four Asian nations, as well as Saudi Arabia, monopolise the continent's World Cup spots thanks to how qualification works and only one, Japan in 2018, have made the knockout stage since 2010. Since 1994, apart from single appearances from China and North Korea – hardly the most accessible of teams for neutrals to get behind or journalists to cover – no other nation has represented the world's most populous continent and told their stories to the watching billions. It will be the same in Qatar with only the hosts offering new faces and stories.

CAF has more diversity in terms of the representatives it sends to the World Cup. In this century alone, it has sent Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon, Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Tunisia, Togo, South Africa and Angola to the global stage. That's 12 compared to Asia's seven.

Africa is seen much more purely as a football market while Asia, with its massive population and increasing spending power, is still regarded in more commercial terms. For years, signings of Japanese or Korean players have been greeted with talk of commercial possibilities and new revenue streams. This has lessened a little over the years but Asia is still seen more as a place to make money than to watch football.

Almost every game in AFCON features players familiar to all football fans. Asian nations can't match that in terms of either quantity or quality

Asia could do more to sell itself. There is a long and rich tapestry of football history (India's Durand Cup, for example, is the third-oldest cup competition in the world) and culture in the continent's scene but in terms of international interest, it is a long way behind Africa.

Reigning Asian champions...Qatar won the 2019 AFC Asian Cup

Club World Cup

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Chelsea complete trophy collection

Club World Cup victory makes the Blues the fifth European club to win every major trophy

Passionate fans... Palmeiras were the best-supported club in Abu Dhabi

At long last, Chelsea are world champions. Roman Abramovich beamed, chatting away on the pitch of Abu Dhabi's Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium. Chelsea have now won every single trophy available since the Russian acquired the club in 2003, his stratospheric investment prompting the era of Europe's super clubs.

In a dramatic and suspenseful final of the Club World Cup, Kai Havertz's extra-time penalty was the difference against South American champions Palmeiras. No one expected the Sao Paulo club to play for possession: Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira applies an unabashedly conservative style, asking his team to defend and then defend some more, lurking on the counter-attack.

The Portuguese coach relishes the big games and the planning that goes with them. He is something of a mini-Mourinho and Palmeiras lined up with effectively a six-man defence against the European champions, with wingers Gustavo Scarpa and Rony helping the full-backs out in

Champions of the world...Chelsea's Cesar Azpilicueta lifts the trophy

defence. Palmeiras' formation was a 6-4-0, at times a 6-2-2.

His players executed the game plan to the letter. Ferreira had no interest in possession and his approach almost worked. It was a final decided on details: Romelu Lukaku heading Chelsea in front, Raphael Veiga equalising from the penalty spot and Havertz demonstrating his knack for decisive goals, having scored the winner in the 2021 Champions League final that took Chelsea to the United Arab Emirates.

The German's strike left the Brazilians heartbroken. Palmeiras were hell-bent on victory to silence local rivals Santos, Sao Paulo and Corinthians who have all won the competition. In general, South America has always loved the Club World Cup. It's the moment when the region's clubs can emulate the very best, the fans get behind their team like never before and the media build-up goes into overdrive.

That was in evidence again in Abu Dhabi where Palmeiras fans packed the stands with their drums and vocal support. For much of the week, they had flooded the streets of the UAE capital, which took over hosting the delayed 2021 Club World Cup after Japan withdrew because of COVID. In 2019, thousands of Flamengo fans travelled to Doha, dreaming of a repeat of 1981 when Zico and Co. breezed past Liverpool 3-0. A decade ago, in 2012, 30,000 Corinthians fans flew to Yokohama, Japan, to witness history and see their club defeat Chelsea, 1-0.

Back then, Tite, the current Brazil coach, and his team sat back, absorbed the pressure and countered. He later explained that "Chelsea's fragility was in front of its two centre-backs, [Gary] Cahill and David Luiz, and in behind [Frank] Lampard and Ramires." Tite had also planned meticulously, acknowledging, like Ferreira, the superiority of European club football and the pointlessness of trying to go toe-to-toe.

And yet, there is a sense that the gulf between South America and Europe is closing a bit – at least from a Brazilian perspective. Flamengo, who took Liverpool to extra-time in 2019, and Palmeiras make up two thirds of a new trio of super clubs, alongside Atletico Mineiro. If anyone can come close to bridging the gap between the two continents, it is one of these three.

There is of course a caveat: Palmeiras arrived in the UAE thoroughly focused and obsessed with victory, while Chelsea treated the competition like a sideshow. On the eve of the competition, Chelsea had struggled their way past Plymouth Argyle in the FA Cup after extra-time; hardly European champions at the height of their power.

> **"Why does Palmeiras start the Club World Cup from the semi-finals? We beat them last year, what's the difference? It is time for the African clubs to be respected"**
>
> Al Ahly coach Pitso Mosimane

The observation goes to the heart of the question of where the future of football and the competition lay. Which clubs belong to the centre and the periphery of the global game? Can an expanded 24-team Club World Cup, with potential continental Super Leagues as feeder competitions, redraw the balance of power that today firmly lies with Europe and the riches of the Champions League?

Earlier in the competition, Al Ahly head coach Pitso Mosimane criticised organisers for a lack of respect towards African clubs as his team had to play without Egypt internationals against Monterrey in the second round because of a fixture clash with the Africa Cup of Nations. At a news conference, the South African boss said: "How many times do Africans have to prove themselves? What is the standard? Why does Palmeiras start the Club World Cup from the semi-finals? We beat them last year, what's the difference? It is time for the African clubs to be respected."

The African champions defeated their Mexican opponents 1-0, but slumped to a 2-0 defeat against Palmeiras, the team they had pipped to third place in 2020, a feat they repeated with a spectacular 4-0 victory against nine-men Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia. Leonardo Jardim, the coach of the Asian champions, also complained of FIFA favouritism towards Chelsea.

"I'd like to give a warning to FIFA and I find it unfair some teams have to play four matches in eight days and other teams have to play two matches with their teams not rested," he said. "There should be better care with the match schedule to recover so teams from Asia and South America can have the ambition to win this cup."

His comments highlight that the Club World Cup is dearly valued outside of Europe. But the current seven-team format, shoehorned into a busy football calendar, is odd and pleases few – least of all FIFA. President Gianni Infantino considers the Club World Cup a way to both tap into the lucrative club market and keep UEFA's power in check. In his view, a bigger tournament would level the playing field, a valid concern that Palmeiras – to an extent – helped allay this year.

Match winner...Kai Havertz scores the decisive penalty

Outspoken...Al Ahly's South African coach Pitso Mosimane criticised the organisers

2021 CLUB WORLD CUP

AL AHLY (EGY)

GOALKEEPERS

16 Ali **LOTFI**	(32) 14.10.89
31 Mostafa **SHOBEIR**	(21) 17.03.00
33 Hamza **ALAA**	(20) 01.03.01

DEFENDERS

5 Ramy **RABIA**	(28) 20.05.93
6 Yasser **IBRAHIM**	(28) 10.02.93
12 Ayman **ASHRAF**	(30) 09.04.91
20 Mahmoud **WAHID**	(27) 19.06.94
21 Ali **MAALOUL** (Tun)	(32) 01.01.90
24 Mohamed **ABDELMONEM**	(23) 01.02.99
28 Karim **FOUAD**	(22) 01.10.99
30 Mohamed **HANY**	(26) 25.01.96
66 Mohamed **MAGHRABI**	(20) 28.04.01

MIDFIELDERS

8 Hamdy **FATHY**	(27) 29.09.94
11 Walid **SOLIMAN**	(37) 01.12.84
14 Hussein **EL SHAHAT**	(29) 21.06.92
15 Aliou **DIENG** (Mli)	(24) 16.10.97
17 Amr **EL SOLIA**	(31) 02.04.90
19 Magdy **AFSHA**	(25) 06.03.96
29 Luis **MIQUISSONE** (Moz)	(26) 25.07.95
35 Ahmed **ABDEL KADER**	(22) 23.05.99
45 Ziad **TAREK**	(21) 06.09.00

FORWARDS

10 Mohamed **SHERIF**	(25) 04.02.96
27 Taher **MOHAMED**	(24) 07.03.97

COACH

Pitso **MOSIMANE** (RSA)	(57) 26.07.64

AL HILAL (KSA)

GOALKEEPERS

1 Abudullah **AL MAYOUF**	(35) 23.01.87
21 Mohammed **AL OWAIS**	(30) 10.10.91
33 Abdullah **AL JADAANI**	(30) 06.03.91

DEFENDERS

2 Mohammed **AL BURAYK**	(29) 15.09.92
5 Ali **AL BULAIHI**	(32) 21.11.89
12 Yasser **AL SHAHRANI**	(29) 25.05.92
13 Abdulrahman **AL OBAID**	(28) 30.04.93
20 **JANG** Hyun-soo (Kor)	(30) 28.09.91
32 Muteb **AL MUFARRIJ**	(25) 19.08.96
66 Saud **ABDULHAMID**	(22) 18.07.99
70 Mohammed **JAHFALI**	(31) 24.10.90
88 Hamad **AL YAMI**	(22) 17.05.99

MIDFIELDERS

6 Gustavo **CUELLAR** (Col)	(29) 14.10.92
7 Salman **AL FARAJ**	(32) 01.08.89
15 **MATHEUS PEREIRA** (Bra)	(25) 05.05.96
19 Andre **CARRILLO** (Per)	(30) 14.06.91
28 Mohamed **KANNO**	(27) 22.09.94
29 Salem **AL DAWSARI**	(30) 19.08.91
43 Musab **AL JUWAYR**	(18) 20.06.03

FORWARDS

9 Odio **IGHALO** (Nga)	(32) 16.06.89
11 Saleh **AL SHEHRI**	(28) 01.11.93
17 Moussa **MAREGA** (Mli)	(30) 14.04.91
96 **MICHAEL** (Bra)	(25) 12.03.96

COACH

Leonardo **JARDIM** (Por)	(47) 01.08.74

AL JAZIRA (UAE)

GOALKEEPERS

1 Abdullrahman **AL AMERI**	(23) 30.04.98
55 Ali **KHASEIF**	(34) 09.06.87
56 Rakaan **WALEED**	(20) 27.03.01

DEFENDERS

2 Abdullah **IDREES**	(22) 06.08.99
4 Milos **KOSANOVIC** (Srb)	(31) 28.05.90
5 Khalifa **AL HAMMADI**	(23) 07.11.98
6 Mohammed **AL ATTAS**	(24) 05.08.97
15 Mohammed **RABII** (Mar)	(20) 29.09.01
38 Nawaf **DHAWI**	(19) 04.09.02

MIDFIELDERS

8 Mamadou **COULIBALY** (Civ)	(18) 03.06.03
11 Abdalla **RAMADAN**	(23) 07.03.98
12 Salem **RASHID**	(28) 21.12.93
17 Thulani **SERERO** (RSA)	(31) 11.04.90
19 Oumar **TRAORE** (Mli)	(19) 20.07.02
22 Mohammed **JAMAL**	(27) 11.05.94
24 Zayed **SULTAN**	(20) 11.04.01
28 Yousef **AYMAN**	(22) 07.04.99
29 **JOAO VICTOR** (Bra)	(29) 27.03.94

FORWARDS

7 Ali **MABKHOUT**	(31) 05.10.90
9 Zayed **AL AMERI**	(25) 14.01.97
21 Abdoulay **DIABY** (Mli)	(30) 21.05.91
70 Ahmed **AL HASHMI**	(26) 28.09.95
80 **BRUNO** (Bra)	(20) 10.06.01

COACH

Marcel **KEIZER** (Ned)	(53) 15.01.69

AS PIRAE (TAH)

GOALKEEPERS

1 Axel **WILLIAMS**	(38) 03.12.83
16 Teva **DUROT**	(35) 31.01.87
23 Steve **TAERO**	(43) 03.04.78

DEFENDERS

2 Taumihau **TIATIA**	(30) 25.07.91
3 Matatia **PAAMA**	(29) 03.10.92
4 Haumau **TANETOA**	(17) 29.06.04
13 Ariiura **LABASTE**	(19) 26.07.02
20 Alvin **TEHAU**	(32) 10.04.89
26 Tuiterai **DEZERVILLE**	(17) 29.06.04
30 Jonathan **TEHAU**	(34) 05.01.88

MIDFIELDERS

6 Tehatu **GITTON**	(19) 02.04.02
7 Avearii **BENNETT**	(22) 20.11.99
8 Heiraurii **SALEM**	(23) 28.04.98
10 Patrick **TEPA**	(32) 28.05.89
11 Sandro **TAU**	(24) 30.04.97
12 Nehemia **TERIITAHI**	(18) 20.01.04
17 Sylvain **GRAGLIA**	(32) 12.04.89
19 Heimano **BOUREBARE**	(32) 15.05.89
21 Teimanaitera **PATER**	(19) 20.06.02
22 Jay **WARREN**	(32) 04.05.89

FORWARDS

9 Benoit **MATHON** (Fra)	(32) 05.04.89
14 Roonui **TINIRAUARII**	(24) 14.03.97
18 Yohann **TIHONI**	(27) 20.07.94

COACH

Naea **BENNETT**	(44) 08.07.77

CHELSEA (ENG)

GOALKEEPERS

1 **KEPA** Arrizabalaga (Spa)	(27) 03.10.94
13 Marcus **BETTINELLI**	(29) 24.05.92
16 Edouard **MENDY** (Sen)	(29) 01.03.92

DEFENDERS

2 Antonio **RUDIGER** (Ger)	(28) 03.03.93
3 Marcus **ALONSO** (Spa)	(31) 28.12.90
4 Andreas **CHRISTENSEN** (Den)	(25) 10.04.96
6 **THIAGO SILVA** (Bra)	(37) 22.09.84
14 Trevoh **CHALOBAH**	(22) 05.07.99
28 Cesar **AZPILICUETA** (Spa)	(32) 28.08.89
31 Malang **SARR** (Fra)	(23) 23.01.99

MIDFIELDERS

5 **JORGINHO** (Ita)	(30) 20.12.91
7 N'Golo **KANTE** (Fra)	(30) 29.03.91
8 Mateo **KOVACIC** (Cro)	(27) 06.05.94
17 **SAUL** Niguez (Spa)	(27) 21.11.94
18 Ross **BARKLEY**	(28) 05.12.93
19 Mason **MOUNT**	(23) 10.01.99
20 Callum **HUDSON-ODOI**	(21) 07.10.00
23 **KENEDY** (Bra)	(25) 08.02.96
29 Kai **HAVERTZ** (Ger)	(22) 11.06.99

FORWARDS

9 Romelu **LUKAKU** (Bel)	(28) 13.05.93
10 Christian **PULISIC** (USA)	(23) 18.09.98
11 Timo **WERNER** (Ger)	(25) 06.03.96
22 Hakim **ZIYECH** (Mar)	(28) 19.03.93

COACH

Thomas **TUCHEL** (Ger)	(48) 29.08.73

Joint-top scorer...Al Jazira's Abdoulay Diaby scored two goals in Abu Dhabi

Deyverson...the Palmeiras hot-shot shoots towards goal against Al Ahly

MONTERREY (MEX)

GOALKEEPERS

1 Esteban **ANDRADA** (Arg)	(31) 26.01.91
22 Luis **CARDENAS**	(28) 15.09.93
24 Cesar **RAMOS**	(21) 14.06.00

DEFENDERS

3 Cesar **MONTES**	(24) 24.02.97
6 Edson **GUTIERREZ**	(26) 19.01.96
14 Erick **AGUIRRE**	(24) 23.02.97
15 Hector **MORENO**	(34) 17.01.88
17 Jesus **GALLARDO**	(27) 15.08.94
20 Sebastian **VEGAS** (Chi)	(25) 04.12.96
27 Daniel **PARRA**	(22) 20.07.99
33 Stefan **MEDINA** (Col)	(29) 14.06.92
43 Alan **MONTES**	(21) 26.10.00

MIDFIELDERS

4 Luis **ROMO**	(26) 05.06.95
5 Matias **KRANEVITTER** (Arg)	(28) 21.05.93
11 Maximiliano **MEZA** (Arg)	(29) 15.12.92
16 Celso **ORTIZ** (Par)	(33) 26.01.89
21 Alfonso **GONZALEZ**	(27) 05.09.94
30 Rodolfo **PIZARRO**	(27) 15.02.94

FORWARDS

7 Rogelio **FUNES MORI**	(30) 05.03.91
8 Joel **CAMPBELL** (Crc)	(29) 26.06.92
9 Vincent **JANSSEN** (Ned)	(27) 15.06.94
19 Alfonso **ALVARADO**	(21) 15.03.00
49 Kaleth **HERNANDEZ**	(21) 26.01.01

COACH

Javier **AGUIRRE**	(63) 01.12.58

PALMEIRAS (BRA)

GOALKEEPERS

21 **WEVERTON**	(34) 13.12.87
31 **MATEUS**	(19) 02.05.02
42 **MARCELO LOMBA**	(35) 18.12.86

DEFENDERS

2 **MARCOS ROCHA**	(33) 11.12.88
4 Benjamin **KUSCEVIC** (Chi)	(25) 02.05.96
6 **JORGE**	(25) 28.03.96
12 **MAYKE**	(29) 10.11.92
13 **LUAN**	(28) 10.05.93
15 Gustavo **GOMEZ** (Par)	(28) 06.05.93
22 Joaquin **PIQUEREZ** (Uru)	(23) 24.08.98
26 **MURILO**	(24) 27.03.97

MIDFIELDERS

8 **ZE RAFAEL**	(28) 16.06.93
14 **GUSTAVO SCARPA**	(28) 05.01.94
20 Eduard **ATUESTA** (Col)	(24) 18.06.97
23 **RAPHAEL VEIGA**	(26) 19.06.95
28 **DANILO**	(20) 19.04.01
30 **JAILSON**	(26) 07.09.95

FORWARDS

7 **DUDU**	(30) 07.01.92
10 **RONY**	(26) 11.05.95
11 **WESLEY**	(22) 30.03.99
16 **DEYVERSON**	(30) 08.05.91
19 **BRENO LOPES**	(26) 24.01.96
29 **RAFAEL NAVARRO**	(21) 04.04.00

COACH

Abel **FERRERIA** (Por)	(43) 22.12.78

(ages as of 03.02.22)

MARCH 18-APRIL 14

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

(All kick-off times, if stated, are BST)

Friday March 18

SWITZERLAND: It's the draw for the quarter and semi-finals of the Champions League, Europa League and Europa Conference League.

Saturday March 19

SPAIN: The Bernabeu hosts the *Clasico*. Elsewhere, Sevilla take on Real Sociedad and Rayo Vallecano play Atletico Madrid.

Clasico... Real won 2-1 at the Nou Camp in October

ITALY: In Serie A, the Rome derby gets underway as Roma play Lazio.
ENGLAND: The 2021-22 FA Cup quarter-finals begin.
ARGENTINA: River Plate face Boca Juniors in the *Superclasico* and Independiente take on Racing Club in the Avellaneda derby.

Sunday March 20

FRANCE: In Ligue 1, Monaco and PSG meet at the Stade Louis II, while top-four rivals Marseille and Nice also face off.
QATAR: Oceania World Cup 2022 qualifying continues.
AFRICA: The preliminary round of qualifying for AFCON 2023 takes place with Botswana, Lesotho and Gambia among the teams involved.
NETHERLANDS: Ajax host arch-rivals Feyenoord in *De Klassieker*.

Monday March 21

QATAR: New Zealand are in action in Oceania World Cup qualifying.

Tuesday March 22

WOMEN: In the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals, Real Madrid face Barcelona and Bayern Munich meet PSG.

Wednesday March 23

WOMEN: The Champions League last eight continues with Juventus v Lyon and Arsenal v Wolfsburg.
SOUTH AMERICA: Fourth-placed Uruguay face Peru in fifth for the continent's key World Cup qualifier. Third-placed Ecuador can secure qualification with a win in Paraguay.
CONCACAF: Canada will secure their place in Qatar with victory in Costa Rica, while Mexico face USA.

Thursday March 24

ASIA: Australia take on Japan in a massive, must-win World Cup qualifier for the Socceroos.
EUROPE: The World Cup play-off semi-finals commence, with Italy v North Macedonia, Portugal v Turkey, Scotland v Ukraine, Sweden v Czech Republic and Wales v Austria all scheduled for a 7.45pm kick-off. In the Nations League relegation play-outs, it's Moldova v Kazakhstan and Estonia v Cyprus.
QATAR: The Oceania World Cup qualifying group stage concludes with every team in action.

Friday March 25

AFRICA: In a repeat of the AFCON final, Egypt meet Senegal in the first leg of the World Cup qualifying play-offs. Elsewhere, Cameroon face Algeria, Ghana meet Nigeria, DR Congo host Morocco, and Tunisia visit Mali.

Saturday March 26

WOMEN: It's the WSL North London derby between Arsenal and Spurs.
ENGLAND: Wembley hosts England and Switzerland's friendly fixture.

Sunday March 27

QATAR: The final four teams meet in the semi-finals of Oceania World Cup qualifying in Doha.

Monday March 28

ASIA: In the final match of AFC World Cup qualifying, Saudi Arabia v Australia is the standout fixture.
SOUTH AMERICA: There's plenty to play for in Peru v Paraguay, Chile v Uruguay and Venezuela v Colombia.

Up for grabs... Chile ace Ben Brereton Diaz

Tuesday March 29

EUROPE: The WC play-off finals are scheduled to take place, and the Nations League relegation play-outs conclude. Elsewhere, England v Ivory Coast and Netherlands v Germany are the standout friendlies.
AFRICA: The second legs of World Cup qualifying play-offs take place.
CONCACAF: World Cup qualifying concludes with Costa Rica v USA.

Wednesday March 30

WOMEN: The Champions League quarter-final second legs take place over the next two days.
QATAR: A place in the inter-confederational play-offs is up for grabs in the final of the Oceania World Cup qualifiers.

Thursday March 31

AFRICA: The CAF Champions League group stage concludes.

Saturday April 2

SPAIN: Barcelona host Sevilla.
ITALY: At the top of Serie A, Internazionale travel to Juventus and Atalanta clash with Napoli.
AFRICA: The group stage of the CAF Confederation Cup concludes.

Sunday April 3

SCOTLAND: Rangers and Celtic meet at Ibrox, with visiting fans allowed inside the ground for the first time this season.

Tuesday April 5

EUROPE: The Champions League quarter-final first-leg ties take place over the next two days.
SOUTH AMERICA: The group stages of both the 2022 Copa Libertadores and the Copa Sudamericana commence.

Wednesday April 6

ASIA: The group stage of the 2022 AFC Champions League begins.

Thursday April 7

EUROPE: It's the first legs of the Europa League and Europa Conference League quarter-finals.

Friday April 8

WOMEN: Qualification for the 2023 World Cup continues, with England in action away to North Macedonia, Wales hosting France and Scotland visiting Ukraine.

Saturday April 9

ENGLAND: Manchester City host Liverpool in a key clash at the top of the Premier League.
TURKEY: Fenerbahce take on Galatasaray in one of the world's biggest grudge matches.

Sunday April 10

USA: The Los Angeles derby – dubbed "El Traffico" – between LA Galaxy and LAFC takes place.
BELGIUM: The regular top-flight season concludes with the top four heading into the Championship play-off round.

Tuesday April 12

WOMEN: In World Cup qualifying, Wales travel to Kazakhstan and Scotland host Spain, while Northern Ireland meet England.
EUROPE: The Champions League quarter-final second legs take place.

Wednesday April 13

EUROPE: The two remaining Champions League semi-finalists will be decided.

Thursday April 14

EUROPE: The second legs of the Europa League and Europa Conference League quarter-finals take place.

Club Football

WORLD

2021 CLUB WORLD CUP

First Round

Feb 3 – Abu Dhabi
Al Jazira 4 (Z. Al Ameri 5, Al Hashmi 25, Kosanovic 40, Diaby 63)
AS Pirae 1 (Rabii 48 og)
Al Jazira: Khaseif (A. Al Ameri 46) – Rabii, Al Hammadi (Sultan 46), Kosanovic (Dhawi 85), Idrees, Serero (Coulibaly 46), Jamal, Diaby, Joao Victor, Z. Al Ameri (Mabkhout 61), Al Hashmi.
AS Pirae: Durot – Bennett (Warren 87), A. Tehau, J. Tehau, Paama, Bourebare, Gitton (Teriitahi 87), Tihoni (Graglia 46), Salem (Tepa 57), Tinirauarii (Pater 79), Mathon.

Second Round

Feb 5 – Abu Dhabi
Al Ahly 1 (Hany 53)
Monterrey 0
Al Ahly: Lotfy – Hany, Ibrahim, Rabia, Maghrabi (Fouad 64), Maaloul, Dieng, Afsha, El Shahat (Soliman 79), Abdel Kader (Miquisonne 74), Mohamed.
Monterrey: Andrada – Aguirre, Kranevitter, Moreno, Vegas (Gallardo 57), Romo, Ortiz, Meza, Gonzalez (Janssen 57), Pizarro (Campbell 68), Funes Mori.

Feb 6 – Abu Dhabi
Al Hilal 6 (Ighalo 36, M. Pereira 40, Kanno 57, Al Dawsari 77, Marega 88, Carrillo 90+2 pen)
Al Jazira 1 (Diaby 14)
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Al Bulaihi, Jang (Al Mufarrij 87), Al Shahrani (Al Burayk 83), Cuellar, Kanno (Jahfali 84), Al Dawsari (Michael 83), M. Pereira, Marega, Ighalo (Carrillo 75).
Al Jazira: Khaseif – Rabii, Al Attas, Kosanovic, Al Hammadi, Idrees (Z. Al Ameri 60), Serero, Ramadan, Diaby, Joao Victor (Mabkhout 60), Al Hashmi (Traore 61).

Semi-Finals

Feb 8 – Abu Dhabi
Palmeiras 2 (R. Veiga 39, Dudu 49)
Al Ahly 0
Palmeiras: Weverton – M. Rocha, Gomez, Luan, Piquerrez, Danilo, Ze Rafael (Atuesta 86), G. Scarpa (B. Lopes 89), R. Veiga (Jailson 79), Dudu (Wesley 78), Rony (Deyverson 88).
Al Ahly: Lotfy – Hany, Ibrahim, Rabia (Fathy 54), Ashraf, Maaloul, Dieng, El Solia (Abdel Kader 54), El Shahat (Sherif 54), Afsha, Mohamed (Soliman 74).
Sent off: Ashraf 81.

Feb 9 – Abu Dhabi
Al Hilal 0
Chelsea 1 (Lukaku 32)
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Al Burayk, Jang, Al Bulaihi, Al Shahrani, Cuellar, Kanno, Al Dawsari (Carrillo 81), M. Pereira (Michael 82), Marega, Ighalo.
Chelsea: Kepa – Azpilicueta, Christensen, T. Silva, Rudiger, Alonso (Sarr 87), Jorginho (Kante 46), Kovacic, Ziyech (Mount 72), Havertz, Lukaku.

Fifth-Placed Match

Feb 9 – Abu Dhabi
Monterrey 3 (Sultan 4 og, Funes Mori 11, Montes 25)
Al Jazira 1 (Bruno 90+1)
Monterrey: Andrada – Medina, Montes, Moreno (Vegas 46), Aguirre, Romo, Kranevitter, Meza (Alvarado 75), Gonzalez (Pizarro 46), Gallardo (Campbell 46), Funes Mori (Janssen 58).
Al Jazira: Khaseif – Rashid, Sultan, Al Hammadi, Idrees (Dhawi 88), Serero, Ramadan (Coulibaly 86), Traore (Bruno 73), Diaby, Z. Al Ameri, Al Hashmi (Ayman 73).

Third-Placed Match

Feb 12 – Abu Dhabi
Al Hilal 0
Al Ahly 4 (Fathy 8, Ibrahim 17, Abdel Kader 40, El Solia 64)
Al Hilal: Al Owais – Abdulhamid, Jang (Al Juwayr 72), Al Mufarrij, Al Shahrani (Al Burayk 72), Cuellar (Jahfali 46), Kanno, Al Dawsari (Michael 84), M. Pereira, Carrillo (Al Faraj 46), Marega.
Sent off: M. Pereira 14, Kanno 28.
Al Ahly: Lotfy – Hany (Fouad 46), Abdelmonem, Ibrahim, Maaloul (Wahid 87), Dieng (Soliman 66), Fathy, El Solia, Abdel Kader (Miquisonne 87), Mohamed (El Shahat 46), Sherif.

Final

Feb 12 – Abu Dhabi
Chelsea 2 (Lukaku 54, Havertz 117 pen)
Palmeiras 1 (R. Veiga 64 pen)
Chelsea: Mendy – Azpilicueta, Christensen (Sarr 90), T. Silva, Rudiger, Hudson-Odoi (Saul 76), Kante, Kovacic (Ziyech 90), Mount (Pulisic 31), Havertz, Lukaku (Werner 76).
Palmeiras: Weverton – M. Rocha (Deyverson 118), Gomez, Luan, Piquerrez, G. Scarpa, Danilo, Ze Rafael (Jailson 60), Dudu (R. Navarro 103), Rony (Wesley 77), R. Veiga (Atuesta 78).
Sent off: Luan 120+6.

EUROPE

2021-22 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Round of 16 - 1st leg

Feb 15 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain 1 (Mbappe 90+4)
Real Madrid 0

Feb 15 – Lisbon
Sporting 0
Manchester City 5 (Mahrez 7, B. Silva 17, 44, Foden 32, Sterling 58)

Feb 16 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg 1 (Adamu 21)
Bayern Munich 1 (Coman 90)

Feb 16 – Milan
Internazionale 0
Liverpool 2 (Firmino 75, Salah 83)

Feb 22 – London
Chelsea 2 (Havertz 8, Pulisic 63)
Lille 0

Feb 22 – Villarreal
Villarreal 1 (Parejo 66)
Juventus 1 (Vlahovic 1)

Feb 23 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid 1 (Joao Felix 7)
Manchester United 1 (Elanga 80)

Feb 23 – Lisbon
Benfica 2 (Haller 26 og, Yaremchuk 72)
Ajax 2 (Tadic 18, Haller 29)

2021-22 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st leg

Feb 17 – Barcelona
Barcelona 1 (Torres 59 pen)
Napoli 1 (Zielinski 29)

Feb 17 – Dortmund
B. Dortmund 2 (Bellingham 51, Guerreiro 82)
Rangers 4 (Tavernier 38 pen, Morelos 41, Lundstram 49, Zagadou 54 og)

Feb 17 – Tiraspol
Sheriff Tiraspol 2 (Thill 43 pen, Traore 83)
Braga 0

Feb 17 – Saint-Petersburg
Zenit 2 (Dzyuba 25, Malcom 28)
Betis 3 (Rodriguez 8, Willian Jose 18, Guardado 41)

Feb 17 – Bergamo
Atalanta 2 (Djimsiti 61, 63)
Olympiakos 1 (Tiquinho Soares 16)

Feb 17 – Porto
Porto 2 (Martinez 37, 49)
Lazio 1 (Zaccagni 23)

Feb 17 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig 2 (Nkunku 30, Forsberg 82 pen)
R. Sociedad 2 (Le Normand 8, Oyarazabal 64 pen)

Feb 17 – Seville
Sevilla 3 (Rakitic 13 pen, Ocampos 44, Martial 45+1)
Dinamo Zagreb 1 (Orsic 41)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd leg

Feb 24 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb 1 (Orsic 65 pen)
Sevilla 0
Sevilla win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Rome
Lazio 2 (Immobile 19, Cataldi 90+5)
Porto 2 (Taremi 31 pen, Uribe 68)
Porto win 4-3 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Piraeus
Olympiakos 0
Atalanta 3 (Maehle 40, Malinovskyi 67, 69)
Atalanta win 5-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad 1 (Zubimendi 67)
RB Leipzig 3 (Orban 39, Silva 59, Forsberg 89 pen)
RB Leipzig win 5-3 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Naples
Napoli 2 (Insigne 23 pen, Politano 87)
Barcelona 4 (Alba 8, F. de Jong 13, Pique 45, Aubameyang 59)
Barcelona win 5-3 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Glasgow
Rangers 2 (Tavernier 22 pen, 57)
Borussia Dortmund 2 (Bellingham 31, Malen 42)
Rangers win 6-4 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Seville
Real Betis 0
Zenit 0
Real Betis win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Braga
Braga 2 (Medeiros 17, R. Horta 43)
Sheriff Tiraspol 0
2-2 on aggregate. Braga win 4-3 on pens

2021-22 UEFA EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st leg

Feb 17 – Herning
Midtjylland 1 (Andersson 20)
PAOK 0

Feb 17 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce 2 (Pelkas 58, Kadioglu 83)
Slavia Prague 3 (Traore 45, Dorley 62, Lingr 64)

Feb 17 – Eindhoven
PSV 1 (Gakpo 11)
Maccabi Tel-Aviv 0

Feb 17 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna 2 (Druijf 1, Grull 16)
Vitesse 1 (Openda 74)

Feb 17 – Glasgow
Celtic 1 (Maeda 79)
Bodo/Glimt 3 (Espejord 7, Pellegrino 55, Vetlesen 81)

Feb 17 – Leicester
Leicester City 4 (Ndidi 23, Barnes 49, Daka 55, Dewsbury-Hall 74)
Randers 1 (Hammershoy-Mistrati 45)

Feb 17 – Marseille
Marseille 3 (Milik 41, 44 Payet 90+2)
Qarabag 1 (Kady 85)

Feb 17 – Prague
Sparta Prague 0
Partizan Belgrade 1 (Menig 78)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd leg

Feb 24 – Bode
Bodo/Glimt 2 (Solbakken 9, Vetlesen 69)
Celtic 0
Bodo/Glimt win 5-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Tel Aviv
Maccabi Tel-Aviv 1 (Saborit 90+1)
PSV 1 (Vertessen 85)
PSV win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Belgrade
Partizan Belgrade 2 (Gomes 7, 24)
Sparta Prague 1 (Hlozek 85)
Partizan Belgrade win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Baku
Qarabag 0
Marseille 3 (Gueye 12, Guendouzi 77, Konrad 90+2)
Marseille win 6-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Randers
Randers 1 (Odey 84)
Leicester City 3 (Barnes 2, Maddison 70, 74)
Leicester City win 7-2 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Thessaloniki
PAOK 2 (A. Zivkovic 20, Vieirinha 26)
Midtjylland 1 (Hoegh 80)
2-2 on aggregate. PAOK win 5-3 on pens

Feb 24 – Prague
Slavia Prague 3 (Schranz 19, Sor 27, 63)
Fenerbahce 2 (Yandas 39, Berisha 90)
Slavia Prague win 6-4 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Arnhem
Vitesse 2 (Grbic 3, Bero 19)
Rapid Vienna 0
Vitesse win 3-2 on aggregate

AFRICA

2021-22 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage

Group A

Feb 11 – Rustenburg
Mamelodi Sundowns 1 (Zwane 8)
Al Hilal Omdurman 0

Feb 18 – Omdurman
Al Hilal Omdurman 0
Al Ahly 0

Feb 19 – Omdurman
Al Merrikh 0
Mamelodi Sundowns 0

Feb 25 – Omdurman
Al Merrikh 2 (Saadeldin 3, 42)
Al Hilal Omdurman 1 (Abdelrahman 32)

Feb 26 – Cairo
Al Ahly 0
Mamelodi Sundowns 1 (Morena 85)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi S.	3	2	1	0	2	0	7
Al Merrikh	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Al Ahly	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Al Hilal O.	3	0	1	2	1	3	1

Group B

Feb 12 – Conakry
Horoya 0
ES Setif 1 (Kendouci 47)

Feb 12 – Casablanca
Raja 1 (Moutouali 67)
AmaZulu 0

Feb 18 – Blida
ES Setif 0
Raja 1 (Zrida 71)

Feb 18 – Durban
AmaZulu 1 (Memela 31)
Horoya 0

Feb 25 – Durban
AmaZulu 1 (Memela 42)
ES Setif 0

Feb 25 – Casablanca
Raja 1 (Moutouali 67)
Horoya 0

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Raja	3	3	0	0	3	0	9
AmaZulu	3	2	0	1	2	1	6
ES Setif	3	1	0	2	1	2	3
Horoya	3	0	0	3	0	3	0

Group C

Feb 11 – Tunis
Etoile du Sahel 0
CR Belouizdad 0

Feb 12 – Tunis
Esperance 4 (Ben Romdhane 1, 29, 32, Eduwo 86)
Jwaneng Galaxy 0

Feb 19 – Francistown
Jwaneng Galaxy 1 (Sesiniyi 90+1)
Etoile du Sahel 1 (Coulibaly 14)

Feb 19 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad 1 (Aribi 15 pen)
Esperance 1 (Machmoum 82)

Feb 26 – Francistown
Jwaneng Galaxy 1 (Baruti 84)
CR Belouizdad 2 (Merzougui 77, 90+3)

Feb 26 – Tunis
Etoile du Sahel 0
Esperance 0

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance	3	1	2	0	5	1	5
CR Belouizdad	3	1	2	0	3	2	5
Etoile du Sahel	3	0	3	0	1	1	3
Jwaneng G.	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group D

Feb 11 – Casablanca
Wydad 3 (Dari 45+1, Jabrane 52 pen, Mbenza 72)
Sagrada Esperanca 0

Feb 12 – Cairo
Zamalek 2 (Obama 57, El-Wensh 90+5)
Petro de Luanda 2 (Gleison 22, Vidinho 36)

Feb 19 – Luanda
Petro de Luanda 2 (Azulao 41, Yano 68)
Wydad 1 (Daoudi 59)

Feb 19 – Luanda
Sagrada Esperanca 0
Zamalek 0

Feb 26 – Luanda
Sagrada Esperanca 0
Petro de Luanda 1 (Azulao 33 pen)

Feb 26 – Casablanca
Wydad 3 (El Moutaraji 27, Farhane 37, Jabrane 88)
Zamalek 1 (Zizo 3)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro de Luanda	3	2	1	0	5	3	7
Wydad	3	2	0	1	7	3	6
Zamalek	3	0	2	1	3	5	2
Sagrada E.	3	0	1	2	0	4	1

CONCACAF

2022 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st leg

Feb 15 – San Jose
Santos de Guapiles 0
New York City FC 2 (Castellanos 5 pen, 30)

Feb 15 – Torreon
Santos Laguna 1 (Ocejo 88)
CF Montreal 0

Feb 16 – Guatemala City
Guastatoya 0
Leon 2 (Fernandez 24, E. Hernandez 34)

Feb 16 – San Jose
Deportivo Saprissa 2 (Bolanos 45+3, 75)
UNAM 2 (Corozo 28, Dinenno 71)

Feb 16 – Hamilton
Forge FC 0
Cruz Azul 1 (Otero 30)

Feb 17 – Tegucigalpa
Motagua 0
Seattle Sounders 0

Feb 17 – Guatemala City
Comunicaciones 1 (Espino 89)
Colorado Rapids 0

Feb 18 – Foxborough
Cavaly -
New England Revolution -
New England Revolution advance to the quarter-finals after Cavaly withdrew

Last 16 – 2nd leg

Feb 22 – Leon
Leon 1 (E. Hernandez 11)
Guastatoya 0
Leon win 3-0 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Montreal
CF Montreal 3 (Quioto 10, Mihailovic 22, Kone 61)
Santos Laguna 0
CF Montreal win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Commerce City
Colorado Rapids 1 (Max 29)
Comunicaciones 0
1-1 on aggregate. Comunicaciones win 4-3 on pens

Feb 23 – Los Angeles
New York City FC 4 (Morales 32, Chanot 36, Talles Magno 80, 86)
Santos de Guapiles 0
New York City FC win 6-0 on aggregate

Feb 23 – Mexico City
UNAM 4 (Ortiz 12, Dinenno 75, 82, Rogerio 90+4)
Deportivo Saprissa 1 (R. Bolanos 51)
UNAM win 6-3 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Seattle
Seattle Sounders 5 (Lodeiro 33, Roldan 47, Morris 56, Rowe 62, Leo Chu 74)
Motagua 0
Seattle Sounders win 5-0 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Mexico City
Cruz Azul 3 (Romero 5, Baca 21, Escobar 44)
Forge FC 1 (Choiniere 26)
Cruz Azul win 4-1 on aggregate

PUERTO RICO

2021 Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Metropolitan*	6	5	0	1	32	8	15
PR Sol*	6	5	0	1	19	9	15
Bayamon (C)*	6	4	0	2	23	11	12
Academia Quintana*	6	2	2	2	19	14	8
Fraigcomar	6	2	1	3	15	9	7
Caguas Sporting	6	0	2	4	9	29	2
Guaynabo Gol	6	0	1	5	6	43	1

**Bayamon won play-offs involving top four teams*

REUNION

2021 Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Excelsior*	14	11	1	2	42	5	48
Saint-Pierroise	14	8	5	1	25	11	43
Jeanne d'Arc	14	5	6	3	25	13	35
Trois Bassins	14	6	3	5	18	15	35
Parfin	14	4	6	4	14	20	32
Marsouins**	14	3	3	8	6	24	26
SDEFA (R)	14	2	4	8	7	29	24
Bretagne (R)	14	2	2	10	6	26	22

2021 GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
La Tamponnaise (C)*	14	12	1	1	34	8	51
Saint-Denis	14	10	2	2	26	9	46
Sainte-Marienne	14	6	3	5	21	16	35
Capricorne	14	5	4	5	17	15	33
Saint-Pauloise	14	3	6	5	10	9	29
Saint-Louis (R)**	14	3	6	5	10	19	29
Piton Saint-Leu (R)	14	3	3	8	12	25	26
Makes (R)	14	0	3	11	10	39	17

**La Tamponnaise beat Excelsior in final play-off*
***Marsouins beat Saint-Louis in relegation play-off*

TURKS & CAICOS

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Blue Hills (C)	10	7	1	2	26	9	22
SWA Sharks	10	6	2	2	22	11	20
Beaches	10	6	0	4	29	17	18
Academy Eagles	10	6	0	4	20	14	18
Teachers	10	2	1	7	17	32	7
Flamingo	10	1	0	9	10	41	3

OCEANIA

COOK ISLANDS

2021 Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nikao (C)	15	12	1	2	38	6	37
Tupapa Maraerenga	15	11	1	3	43	15	34
Titikaveka	15	6	4	5	27	27	22
Avatiu	15	4	3	8	18	39	15
Puaikura	15	2	4	9	12	30	10
Matavera-Ngatangiia	15	1	5	9	17	38	8

Internationals EUROPE

2022-23 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Matchdays 1-4 (Jun 2-14)

Group A1
Croatia v Austria, France v Denmark
Austria v Denmark, Croatia v France
Austria v France, Denmark v Croatia
Denmark v Austria, France v Croatia

Group A2
Czech Rep v Switzerland, Spain v Portugal
Czech Rep v Spain, Portugal v Switzerland
Portugal v Czech Rep, Switzerland v Spain
Spain v Czech Rep, Switzerland v Portugal

Group A3
Hungary v England, Italy v Germany
Germany v England, Italy v Hungary
England v Italy, Hungary v Germany
England v Hungary, Germany v Italy

Group A4
Belgium v Netherlands, Poland v Wales
Belgium v Poland, Wales v Netherlands
Netherlands v Poland, Wales v Belgium
Netherlands v Wales, Poland v Belgium

Group B1
Scotland v Armenia, Rep of Ireland v Ukraine
Armenia v Rep of Ireland, Scotland v Ukraine
Rep of Ireland v Scotland, Ukraine v Armenia
Armenia v Scotland, Ukraine v Rep of Ireland

Group B2
Albania v Russia, Israel v Iceland
Iceland v Albania, Israel v Russia
Albania v Israel, Russia v Iceland
Iceland v Israel, Russia v Albania

Group B3
Finland v Bosnia-Herz, Montenegro v Romania
Bosnia-Herz v Romania, Finland v Montenegro
Montenegro v Bosnia-Herz, Romania v Finland
Bosnia-Herz v Finland, Romania v Montenegro

Group B4
Serbia v Norway, Slovenia v Sweden
Serbia v Slovenia, Sweden v Norway
Norway v Slovenia, Sweden v Serbia
Norway v Sweden, Slovenia v Serbia

Group C1
Lithuania v Luxembourg, Turkey v Faroe Islands
Faroe Islands v Luxembourg, Lithuania v Turkey
Faroe Islands v Lithuania, Luxembourg v Turkey
Luxembourg v Faroe Islands, Turkey v Lithuania

Group C2
Cyprus/Estonia v Kosovo, N. Ireland v Greece
Cyprus/Estonia v N. Ireland, Kosovo v Greece
Greece v Cyprus/Estonia, Kosovo v N. Ireland
N. Ireland v Cyprus/Estonia, Greece v Kosovo

Group C3
Kazakhstan/Moldova v Azerbaijan, Slovakia v Belarus
Belarus v Azerbaijan, Slovakia v Kazakhstan/Moldova
Azerbaijan v Slovakia, Belarus v Kazakhstan/Moldova
Kazakhstan/Moldova v Slovakia, Azerbaijan v Belarus

Group C4
Georgia v Gibraltar, Bulgaria v N. Macedonia
Gibraltar v N. Macedonia, Bulgaria v Georgia
Gibraltar v Bulgaria, N. Macedonia v Georgia
Georgia v Bulgaria, N. Macedonia v Gibraltar

Group D1
Latvia v Andorra, Liechtenstein v Kazakhstan/Moldova
Andorra v Kazakhstan/Moldova, Latvia v Liechtenstein
Kazakhstan/Moldova v Latvia, Andorra v Lichtenstein
Kazakhstan/Moldova v Andorra, Liechtenstein v Latvia

Group D2
Cyprus/Estonia v San Marino
San Marino v Malta
Malta v Cyprus/Estonia
Malta v San Marino

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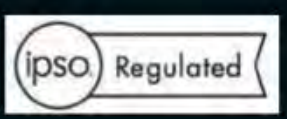

Toni Polster

Austria 3 East Germany 0

World Cup qualifier, 1989, Vienna

As Toni Polster walked out onto the pitch at the Praterstadion for Austria's final qualifier for the 1990 World Cup, the home supporters showered him with boos. With the striker failing to reproduce his prolific Sevilla form for the national team, his home fans had fallen out of love with him; by the end of the game they were singing his name. The man nicknamed "Doppelpack" for his propensity to score braces had just netted a hat-trick to fire his country to Italia '90...

"We were under pressure, because only a victory would qualify us for the World Cup. At the same time we had to hope that the Soviet Union, who had already won the group, would win or at least get a draw at home against Turkey in the other game.

My feeling before the game was that I was on the verge of fulfilling a life dream: to play at a World Cup. And I didn't want to be stopped.

I managed to bundle the anger and fury that was inside me into energy, then everything clicked. With our victory and my three goals, it was a wonderful piece of Austrian football history.

We had an ideal start. After just two minutes I received the ball 25 metres from goal on the right-hand side, feinted a shot a couple of times and then I scored with a powerful and precise low shot that left the goalkeeper helpless.

> "I managed to bundle the anger and fury that was inside me into energy"

The second goal was a penalty. I always took penalties. I was never shy to take responsibility. I sent the keeper the wrong way for our 2-0 lead.

Shortly afterwards East Germany had a big chance with a penalty of their own, but our goalkeeper Klaus Lindenberger saved from Rico Steinmann.

Early in the second half I was close to scoring another goal, but the keeper came out and made a fine save. My third goal came after a solo effort on the left-hand side. I shielded the ball well, went past two defenders and scored with a precise low shot. That then was complete salvation.

After the game I was quickly on my way to the city in order to celebrate the great victory with my family and my closest friends; with people who had always stood by my side, even in hard times. In a nutshell, that game transformed me from the most unpopular player in Austria to the most popular. All in the space of 90 minutes."

> "I was on the verge of fulfilling a life dream: to play at a World Cup"

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Austria legend... Polster during the 1990 World Cup qualifying campaign

Top scorer...Polster scored a record 44 goals for Austria

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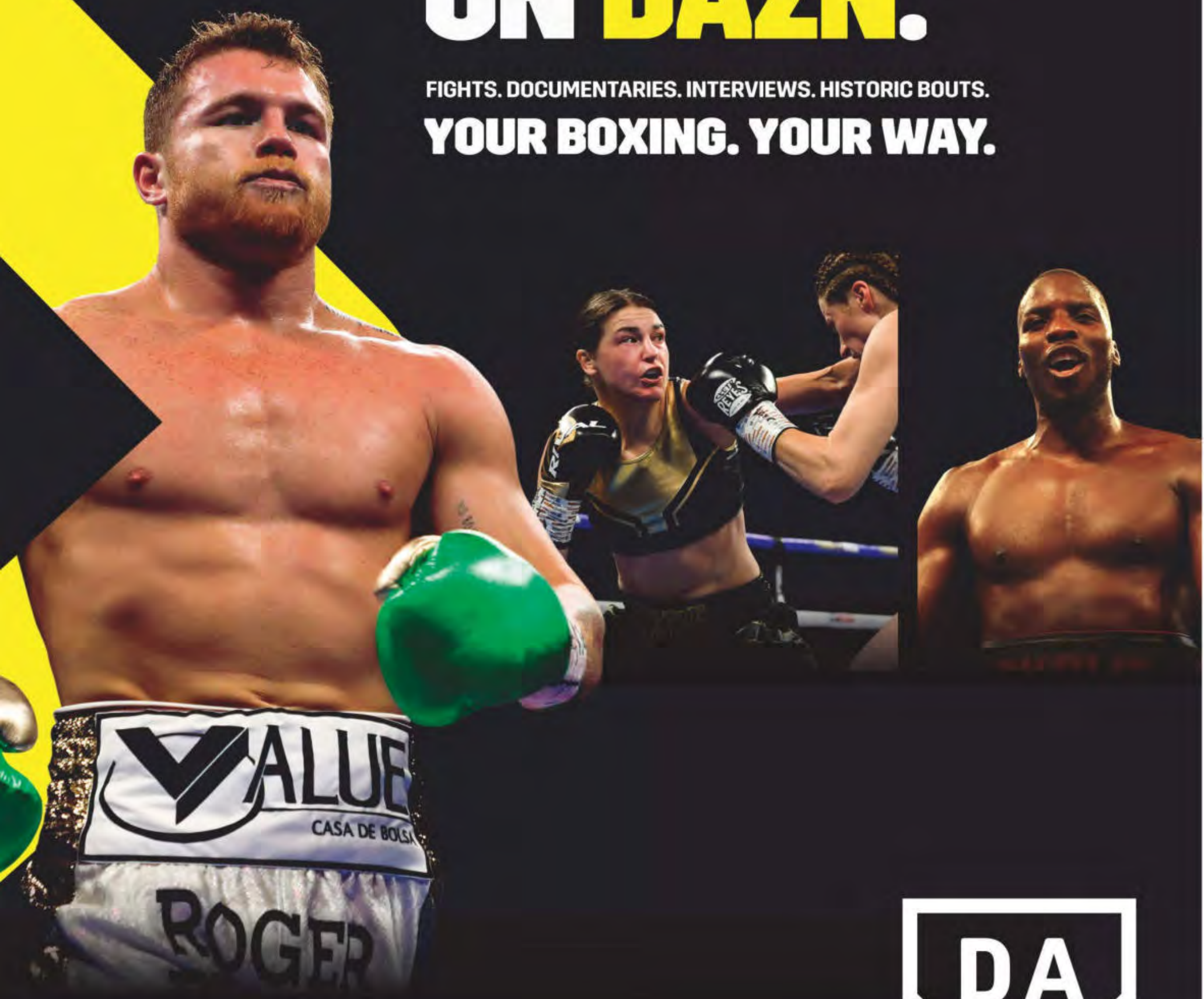

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